True Patriots: Justifying Autonomy for Ladakh

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When the first Ladakh Hill Development Council (Leh) was sworn in on 3 September 1995, Leh District in the Indian State of Jammu and Kashmir regained a measure of the autonomy that the Kingdom of Ladakh had lost in the 1830s. The Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Councils Act 1995, decreed by the President a few months earlier, signified a major concession on the part of State and Central Government, especially considering the strategic and political importance of Ladakh in the overall Kashmir issue. The ‘Reasons for Enactment’ accompanying the Act suggest a straightforward justification: a remote mountain region in need and desirous of decentralization of decision making is given its own administrative body. At first glance, then, this is the stuff that many indigenous peoples, many marginal groups in India and around the world, dream about: a responsive government recognizes the legitimate desires of a minority with a distinct identity.

The Indian press hailed the institution of the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council, Leh (LAHDeC), with headlines such as "A New Beginning" (Bagla, 1995); the Prime Minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao, sent his congratulations to "the brave people of Leh" and expressed his conviction that "this would give tremendous boost to the developmental activities in Leh and meet the aspirations of the people of the region for all round progress"; the Home Minister joined in and the Governor of the State, General K.V. Krishna Rao, addressed the first meeting of the Council saying:

"Today, we have gathered here to mark one of the most important turning points in the history of this great land. This historic event also signifies that from now on, the people of this land will preside over their own destiny. (...) It has been a longstanding demand of the people here for the right to take decisions for their own development. You had to undergo considerable struggle in achieving this Hill Council. I am happy to note that your struggle has been peaceful and democratic means were used towards this end. This is a shining example for every one in our great democratic country, that one can achieve one’s legitimate demands through constitutional means."

As the Governor’s words suggest, Leh District did not get its Hill Council without a struggle. Indeed, if we trace the history of the demand for regional autonomy, we need to go back at least to the 1930s. In his speech, the Governor recognizes the length and difficulty of the struggle and praises the Ladakhis for having used peaceful, democratic means. Now that all is settled, one can get on with the business of development.

The Governor’s speech, the journalists’ writings and the justification accompanying the Act offer an insight

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1 Conquered by the Dogra state a few years earlier, Ladakh was an integral part of the State of Jammu and Kashmir that was created through the Treaty of Amritsar of 1842. While few Ladakhis would challenge the region’s association with India, the link with Kashmir has remained contentious.

2 See (India, 1995) for the full text of the Act. This text is also available online at the website of The Mountain Forum (http://www.mtnforum.org).


4 P.V. Narasimha Rao, telegram to P. Namgyal, 3 September 1995.

5 Excerpt from "Address by General K.V. Krishna Rao, PVSM (Retd), His Excellency the Governor of Jammu and Kashmir to Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council, Leh, on 3rd September, 1995."

6 Of course, Ladakhis also offered resistance to their incorporation into the State in the first place in the 1830s and after, and the memory of independent Ladakh, as we shall see, remains relevant today. However, in terms of the modern political formulation of the demand for regional autonomy, the 1930s and 1940s are where a new form of representation and justification of the demand can be seen to emerge for the first time.
into the creation of an official history. This simplified, sanitized representation of the struggle for regional autonomy and its outcome may enter textbooks and public memory, escaping the confines of the audiences and purposes for which it is originally being composed: to justify concessions to a small bunch of troublemakers on the frontiers of the Nation through safely reinterpreting and representing both history and solutions to the conflict as firmly within the constitutional, political, and nationalist bounds of the nation-state. Ladakhis had legitimate grievances and they were recognized and addressed by the state.

The Government’s willingness to accommodate the Ladakhi demand must also be seen in the light of the broader domestic and international politics of the Kashmir issue, but one still needs to ask why the state celebrates the strengthening of regionalist forces in this case. This should at the very least lead us to ask whether the granting of autonomy to Ladakh is in fact an illustration of the possibility of successful resistance to the hegemony of the nation-state and national development project. The following analysis suggests that quite the reverse may be true: it is precisely its firm location within the discursive and institutional frames of nation-state and development project that makes the empowerment of the Hill Council desirable from the perspective of the state (and arguably from the perspective of at least some of the Ladakhi leaders of the agitation). It is clear that—considering how Ladakhi representatives justified their claims in terms of backwardness and patriotism—the demand did not pose a threat to the national project and nationalist ideology of the Union. This call for minority rights, in other words, was anything but counter-hegemonic, and locally, within Ladakh, was premised on the radical and at times violent silencing of an Other Ladakhi community: Muslims.  

Here, I will look at how political leaders in Ladakh have presented and justified their demand for regional autonomy over the years. I will show that these representations relied on a complementary, but apparently contradictory claim: that Ladakhis are different from the rest of the Indian nation, but true patriots nevertheless. The possibility of making this claim in turn is premised on, first, an erasure and silencing of difference within Ladakh (of class, gender, religion, etc.). This was achieved by emphasizing the region’s geographical, cultural and socio-economic uniqueness within India, and later, during the 1989 agitation, reinforced through the use of a communal representation of Ladakh as Buddhist. This second move, of course, was important in enabling the Ladakhi Buddhist leadership to contrast themselves with the Other communities in the wider State, above all Muslims. Ladakhi secessionism, it was made abundantly clear, was aimed against the State of Jammu and Kashmir, not the Union.

I will suggest that we need to understand Ladakhi politics, like politics elsewhere, as a complex process of negotiation, contestation, and representation; a ‘game’ of strategic deployment of justifications, at once making use of and constrained by the spaces made available by the state’s own discursive tropes. Ladakhi politics, in other words, is the work of people whose actions are guided by their reading and interpretation of the wider political field, and their readings and interpretations, their actions, in turn help shape and reconstitute that very same field. Formal politics is, in this sense, a question of performance, although not just performance.

Three central themes emerge from Ladakhi representations: Ladakh is a poor and backward region, and home to a unique, distinct culture and people; Kashmir’s Government has neglected Ladakh and has failed to develop the region; Ladakh’s population are true patriots and dedicated to the Nation. The same themes are found also in the more communal representations, where Ladakhiness is reduced to Buddhism; the Kashmir Government is driven by communal motivations; and the secessionists in the Valley cannot be trusted precisely because they are Muslims, while Ladakh’s Buddhists are naturally part of India.

As the following account will show, these themes, both in their communal and all-Ladakh forms, recur from the time of the first representation presented on behalf of the Buddhist community to the Glancy Commission. More often than not, an all-Ladakh form is chosen, with the notable exception of Partition, and the 1969 and 1989 agitations. The first of these can be understood in the context of uncertainty over Kashmir’s future and the recent invasion of Ladakh by Pakistani ‘raiders.’ The second and third are of a quite different nature. In both Ladakhi politicians consciously used a communal frame to put pressure on the State and Centre. After the success, albeit limited, of the 1969 agitation, the benefits of communal strategies were clear to the younger Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) leaders. The 1989 agitation, which led to the formation of the Hill Council in 1995, is unique in the consistent effort made by Ladakhi activists to control both internal

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7 Muslims constitute close to 50% of the population of Ladakh as a whole. The vast majority of Muslims live in Kargil district and are Shias. In Leh town, there is a sizable minority of Sunni Muslims, commonly referred to as Arewi. From most official and popular descriptions of Ladakh, its population and culture, the presence of Muslims is either ignored or made into a recent, essentially foreign development. For discussions of the Muslims in Ladakh, see e.g. (Dollfus, 1991; Dollfus, 1995; Grist, 1993; Grist, 1995; Rizvi, 1986).

8 Under pressure from growing opposition against his rule, Maharaja Hari Singh appointed a Commission of Inquiry "to look into grievances and complaints," that became known by the name of its British chairman.
and external representations and mobilizations, allowing the effective positioning of the LBA as communalists against their will, rather than by choice. This enabled them to champion the secular and developmentalist ideals of the Indian state, while pursuing a relentlessly communal campaign 'at home.'

Pre-Independence Demands

The Buddhist community of Ladakh was probably first formally represented on November 13, 1931, in Srinagar. On this occasion B.J. Glancy Esq, I.C.S., C.S.I., etc, Special Minister, His Highness' Government, Jammu and Kashmir, asked a delegation 'representing' the Buddhists of Kashmir to submit a "Memorandum."

At this particular moment in subcontinental history, 'communalism' was seen and experienced as the most important problem, the organizing principle of Indian society, and certainly as the basis for political organization. Kashmir may have been lagging behind other parts of the Subcontinent in communalization, but has done a lot of catching up. That is after all why the Glancy Commission is there in the first place. Its task is explicitly to enquire into the grievances of communities. Ladakh being a very marginal area, 'the' Buddhists did not have any formal representation on the commission, while Hindus and Muslims of Kashmir and Jammu had a representative each, respectively. The representation sought from the Buddhist Community made sense within the frame of perception, analysis, and operation of the Commission, and indeed of the submitters, who went on to found the Kashmir Raj Bodhi Maha Sabha. The 1935 Triennial Report of the KRBMS states: "Those (1932) were the days of political upheaval in the Kashmir State. The Sabha, therefore, had to devote its attention and energy to the cause of the forty thousand helpless and downtrodden Buddhists of Ladakh whose case in the general scramble for percentages, would, otherwise have gone by default." (KRBMS, 1935)

In the memorandum, several important themes can be distinguished. First, the idea of 'community' and hence the possibility and desirability of 'representation' is central. For the KRBMS leadership, having experience and knowledge of the communal organisation of Indian politics and the changing nature of state involvement in allocations on a communal basis, to represent and be seen to represent community is the only way forward to the 'modern' civilized life. Secondly, Progress, upliftment, etc., are very much central concerns of the Sabha. Education, in their eyes, is the key to civilization, survival, and progress. And such things are achieved on a community basis. Their communal understanding of progress and history is also seen in the reference to "amelioration" of the life of the Ladakhi Buddhists, and in the goal being "equality" with "the other communities inhabiting the State." Community, in the KRBMS worldview, is already objectified in a way which is quite unthinkable in Ladakh itself at this point.10

Economic disadvantages were and continued to be only a secondary concern of the KRBMS, as these were seen to be caused precisely by the Ladakhi Buddhists' educational 'backwardness.' Statistics were deployed to strengthen the case for Buddhist discrimination, legitimacy of demands, and need for appropriate action by the Government.11 The use of number here is also an instrument to compare directly and competitively the 'status' and 'privileging' of the different communities.12

A final theme to be mentioned here is the implicit or explicit threat of violence. In the 1935 Report, which was written for an international and national audience of Buddhist Sabhas, this is stated as follows:

"Smarting under the sting of this grave injustice (the lack of action by the Government) the Sabha was in danger of drifting towards jingoist tactics—the favourite weapon of other communities in those and later times and giving loose rein to its deep resentment through press and platform and in other ways. But the Sabha refused to be carried off its feet and tenaciously held to its creed of peaceful and constitutional representation." (KRBMS, 1935: 4)---

9 It was because of the desire for a Buddhist voice at the Enquiry that the KRBMS was founded. (See also Rabgias, 1984; Shakspo, 1988).

10 The central figure in the formulation of the views of the KRBMS as well as in 'educating' Ladakhis in these terms was Shridhar Kaul. Kaul was one of the founders of the KRBMS, and as a civil servant of the J&K State held a number of different education-related posts, including that of 'inspector of schools.' Kaul was mentor to many of Ladakh's reform-oriented political and social activists, served as Kushok Bakula Rinpoche's adviser and speech writer, and was one of the central figures in promoting modern education in Ladakh. Some consider him also to be the original source of communalism in Ladakh.

11 As is evident from KRBMS 1935, there were several representations made to the Commission in 1931-2. Several issues mentioned in the 1935 discussion are not to be found in the Mahabodhi reprint of the text of the December 1931 memorandum. Missing from it, for example, are issues such as consumption of chang, Personal Law, inheritance, etc. Almost certainly these issues were raised in other memoranda which I have been unable to locate. (See Representatives of Kashmir Buddhists, 1932). Bertelsen 1997 has a fuller account of the various memoranda.

12 As we will see, there is a remarkable continuity in the way number and statistics are used to present and legitimize the 'Buddhist' case, but there are also important differences between 1932 and 1989.
The Government may not have trembled at the prospect of an irate mob of four or five neo-Buddhist Kashmiri Pandits marching down La! Chowk, but the reference to Buddhist *ahimsa* combined with a thinly veiled threat of violence will be seen to recur again and again.

At this time, Ladakhis themselves played hardly any role at all, be it in the expression of grievances, presentation of memoranda, or formulation of demands.13 This agenda, these strategies, these representations, were the work of a very small group of Kashmiri Pandits, Shridhar Kaul prominent among them, who were well aware of the grammar of contemporary politics in the 1930s, and who played consciously to a wider national and indeed international audience, and who understood themselves as 'elements in a series' of communities.14 Yet, the 1931-2 representations to the Glancy Commission signify the beginning of representations of Ladakhis (in this case reduced to Buddhists) as a community. The language, justifications, and claims of representation are those of citizens and a community that can be compared to other communities in terms of development and backwardness, and these citizens and their community can make demands rather than appeals. As citizens in a democratizing state they have rights.

**A Separate Nation by all the Tests**

The formation of the Ladakh Buddhist Education Society in 1932-3, succeeded by the Young Men’s Buddhist Association in 1938, constituted the beginning of Buddhist political organization in Ladakh itself.15

13 Ladakhis are referred to by Kaul as "dumb-driven cattle" in the Memorandum. They certainly could not be expected to represent themselves.

14 Further representations to the J&K government, with responses which "cannot be called unsatisfactory" were made by the KRBSMS on 18 June, 1932 and 13 March 1934. I have been unable to locate documents pertaining to these events and must rely on KRBMS 1935.

15 There is considerable confusion over the sequence of events in this period. Shakspo (1988) suggests that the Young Men’s Buddhist Association was founded in 1934. However, the Minutebook of the YMBA shows that their founding meeting did not take place until 1938. In these minutes there is mention of the Buddhist Education Society of Ladakh and we (Kristoffer Bertelsen and myself) are now convinced that this is indeed the earliest organization of this kind. An "Informative Questionnaire" submitted by the YMBA’s successor, the LBA, in 1985 to the World Fellowship of Buddhists, gives the date of establishment of the YMBA as April 1937. Given the Minutebook, however, it is fair to assume that this is one year off the mark. In another similar summary of the history of the organization in the archives of the LBA, 1934 is given as the founding date, further adding to the confusion. Ganhar & Ganhar (1956: 224) take 1938 as the founding year. In Bertelsen’s and my own opinion, the Minutebook as a contemporary document must be regarded as the most reliable source in this regard. For the most elaborate discussion of the historical evidence, see Bertelsen (1997).

**The YMBA helped to solidify the outside perception that Ladakhi Buddhist representations were more or less sufficiently representative of Ladakhi voices as such.** The traumatic events surrounding partition and the accession of the State of Jammu and Kashmir added to this communalized imagining of Ladakh. On the eve of Nehru’s first visit to the region in July 1949, this communal perspective is also clear in a representation made by Kalon Tsewang Rigung on behalf of the Buddhists of Ladakh.16 By and large, the representation made the same kinds of claims and complaints as were raised earlier. A new element was the emphatic representation of Ladakh as a nation, and hence having the right to self-determination. It is also in this representation that the right to regional autonomy was first asserted.

In the representation, the Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA), "on behalf of the People of Ladakh" reiterated three proposals that were made to the Maharaja through the Praja Sabha in 1947. The proposals entailed that Ladakh should either be ruled directly by the Maharaja, or "amalgamated with the Hindu majority parts of Jammu should form a separate province" or alternatively, that Ladakh should be permitted to join with East Punjab. In the new representation, it is pointed out that the first two options were merely in deference to the Treaty of Amritsar, and that really only the third option, direct merger with India, would be "a guarantee for our future progress and development." So, in the submission to Nehru, the LBA asks to be merged directly with India (i.e. separated from Kashmir). The memorandum contains the following striking passage:

"We are a separate nation by all the tests—race, language, religion, culture—determining nationality. The only link connecting us with the other people of the state being the bond of 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 Indian population the Government of India should have no hesitation in recognising what is patent and incontrovertible fact in our case. ( . . .)

The right to self-determination claimed by us cannot be claimed with equal force by the people of Baltistan including Skardu and parts of Kargil tehsils predominantly populated by Muslims, as they are connected by ties of religion with the majority
community in Jammu & Kashmir, nor by the people of Gilgit who came under Dogra rule through conquest after the annexation of Kashmir and whom not only identity of religion but of race as well binds to the majority community of Jammu & Kashmir." (quoted in Madhok, 1963: 183-4)

At this time Shridhar Kaul still had much influence on Ladakhi representations, and it is quite likely that he would have had a hand in formulating the memorandum. Its firm assertion of the right to self-determination is striking, and repeated in different forms throughout the document. Ladakhis are a nation and therefore should be allowed to choose their own destiny. Moreover, it is clear from the wording that Ladakh is here understood as Buddhist, as in its description of the territories of Ladakh it emphasises those "predominantly inhabited by Buddhists." (Madhok, 1963: 184)

Not surprisingly, Nehru was less than thrilled by the Ladakhi demand. Given the disputed nature of the status of Kashmir, it would have been imprudent to make any separate arrangement for Ladakh. According to H.N. Kaul, the son of Shridhar Kaul who was present at the meeting, Nehru was sympathetic, but would not give in and the Ladakhi delegation "did not, therefore, press its demand for a 'Union Territory Status' for Ladakh in national interest and on the Prime Minister's assurance that their grievances would be looked into and addressed."[17]

During their visit to Leh, a few weeks later, Nehru and Sheikh Abdullah ceded to local Ladakh pressure (of a non-communal nature) and replaced the Kalon with Bakula Rinpoche.[18] This move signified the incorporation of a section of Ladakh's elite in the process of decision making at the State level, silencing the threat of a general claim for secession of Ladakh from Kashmir. Bakula Rinpoche and his associates profited politically from the reforms carried out by Sheikh Abdullah in the first years of his reign.[19] However, Ladakh itself was felt to be neglected by the State, leading Bakula Rinpoche to deliver a scathing attack on the State Government during the budget session in 1953. This was the first all-out condemnation of the State Government by Ladakhi representatives. Its language was largely patriotic and non-communal, although the alleged discrimination by the State was asserted to be expressive of communalism of the State Government; Ladakh is not communal, but the State is; therefore, Ladakh needs protection from the State by the Centre.

The speech includes many comparisons of the present regime of Abdullah with the previous regime of the Maharaja. In this context, the promises and claims of representation and democracy, of socialism and nationalism, made by Nehru and Abdullah during their visit in 1949, as well as the general rhetoric of nationalism are used as a basis for justifying Ladakhi demands. This speech, then, constitutes another illustration of the fundamental shift in regimes of justification, from subject to national citizen, that makes available such references to justice and equality. At the same time, Bakula Rinpoche is obviously staking a claim to Ladakh's right to self-determination, challenging the 'natural' integration of the region with India. Such a statement in this phase of the dispute over Kashmir was bound to receive attention from the Central Government in New Delhi.

The furore caused by the speech, fueled by its widespread coverage in the press, led to some proposals by Sheikh Abdullah, including a reorganization of the District's administration. However, Bakula Rinpoche declined the offer as it fell short of meeting the demand for direct association with India, a demand he restated once again in a press statement released on 9 June 1952. Consequently, in spite of Bakula Rinpoche's eloquent speech, no action from the government on his demands was forthcoming. Regardless of possible sympathy with Ladakh's plight on the part of Nehru, the larger issue of Kashmir would have prohibited any major concession to Ladakh, in particular any rearrangement of the territorial and administrative composition of the State.

Bakula Rinpoche's failure to secure concessions for Ladakh, the slow pace of development, and perceptions of corruption of the National Conference leaders in Ladakh, led to the emergence of a young, more radical, opposition to Bakula Rinpoche in the early 1960s. This group in 1969 launched an agitation along communal lines. While the initiative for the agitation was taken by the opposition, Bakula Rinpoche joined in and led negotiations with the State. It is said that limited concessions were granted by the State in return for

[17] Interestingly, a second delegation from Ladakh called upon Nehru on 20 May 1949, this time headed by Kushok Bakula Rinpoche, the head of the Gelugpa branch of Tibetan Buddhism in Ladakh. This delegation, according to Kaul and Kaul, "urged the Prime Minister that 'the territorial integrity of the Jammu and Kashmir State of which their country is a part be maintained and that the State as a whole remain with India." Still according to Kaul and Kaul, Bakula Rinpoche protested the Kashmir dominated administration of Ladakh and argued, as was done by the LBA, that with the transfer of Sovereignty the Treaty of Amritsar of 1846 no longer applied and hence Ladakh was free to choose its own destiny. Significantly, the memo referred to a possible reunification with Tibet if Ladakh were not tied directly to the Indian Union. (Kaul and Kaul 1992:185).

[18] This event is sometimes referred to as the 'Coup at Choglamsar Bridge'. See van Beek 1996 for details.

[19] The most important of these were a land reform (which had little real impact in Ladakh) and a settlement of debts through state mediation (which meant a great relief to many households).
Bakula Rinpoche's disavowal of the more radical demands of the agitators. Consequently, the central demand for regional autonomy was not met. There is no space here to discuss the complex and intriguing politics of Ladakh at the time, but the events of 1969 were understood by younger political activists to hold two important lessons: communalism gets results, and the old elite in Ladakh cannot be trusted. Both lessons were applied in the context of the 1989 agitation.20

Defensive Communalism? The 1989 Agitation

Although the agitation did not really start until the summer of 1989, already in December 1986 rumblings of communal dissent were beginning to re-emerge in Ladakh.21 In a memorandum submitted to the Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, during his visit to Leh on 12 December 1986, the LBA wrote:

"It is an irony of history that the once predominant Buddhist population of the region is being, on the sly, pushed into minority status. This is being done so through a discreet, deliberate policy of discrimination and bias pursued by the successive regimes of the State Government. The Government, which is predominantly of the same community as the one that has been seeking protection of minority rights and identity in the Union Government has been the bullying agent with respect to the Buddhist community of Ladakh. On the other hand the Buddhist community, by its very nature, has been very secular, accommodating and tolerant."22

The grievances listed in the memorandum are the usual ones, but with particular prominence given to the issue of conversion. It is alleged that "the Muslim community of the region hand in glove with the State Government have embarked on a conversion spree."23

Most demands and complaints presented to the government in the course of the 1989 agitation were shared by Muslims and Buddhists alike, and in spite of the initial communal flare-up, early public statements were rather non-communal in tone. For example, the 'official' beginning of the agitation can be traced to July 18, 1989, when the LBA held a general meeting at Chokhang Vihara at Leh and adopted the following resolution:

"We the Buddhist of Ladakh, assembled here at this Historic Chokhang Vihara, Leh on the 15th day of the fifth month of Buddhist calendar i.e. on 18th day of July 1989, do hereby resolve and adopt as under:-

That on 7th of July 1989 a mob consisting of some Sunni Muslims and Kashmiris attacked and tried to cause damage to the Chokhang Vihara by throwing explosives inside the premises of the Vihara.

That no action has so far been taken by the State Government against Kashmiris and other miscreants.

That the State Law and Order machinery having failed to protect lives and properties of the Buddhists living in Srinagar, wherefrom the Buddhist Students and families are being forced to flee to Ladakh or Jammu.

Realising that Ladakh has always been treated as a colony and Ladakhis as a third rate citizens of J&K State and accordingly, Ladakh having been neglected in every sphere of life Socially, Politically and economically. We firmly resolve to launch a movement for an alternative administrative setup wherein the ethnic cultural and traditional identity of Ladakhis is safeguarded and that alternative is in declaring Ladakh as a Union Territory.

Therefore, this gathering, consisting of representatives from all over Ladakh, do, hereby, resolve that we shall not rest in peace untill Ladakh is declared as a Union Territory."24

The resolution makes it clear that although the movement is launched by the LBA, representing the Buddhists of Ladakh, it does seek to defend the interests of all Ladakhis. Only the Sunni community is accused of involvement in the rioting, a door being kept open for the vast majority of Shia Muslims in Ladakh to join the agitation. The resolution was also immediately distributed to major news agencies, including PTI and UNI.

The attempt to show LBA interest in an all-Ladakh struggle was further strengthened by the publication of posters, pamphlets, and public statements under the name of Ladakh People's Movement for Union Territory Status (LPMUT). The prime targets in these publications were invariably Kashmiris, and these were alleged to have "indoctrinated" local Sunni Muslims. This, of course, was a smart strategy. First, it allowed the LBA to pose as non-communal. Yet it must also be

20 Again, see van Beek 1996 for detail. A shorter discussion can be found in van Beek and Bertelsen (1997).
21 In the intervening period, a non-communal but no less divided political practice had dominated Ladakh. The most important collaborative effort was a campaign for Scheduled Tribe status. A truly all-Ladakh forum led the movement, but failed to get more than promises from various Central governments. Here, too, then, the lesson was that a non-communal effort would get no results. For detail, see van Beek (1997).
22 Memorandum submitted to Rajiv Gandhi, 12 December 1986. Signed by President LBA, Tondup Sonam.
23 The issue (or fear) of conversion is an old one, going back to at least the times of Shridhar Kaul and the KRB. The issue had gained new salience also through a series of incidents involving the small Christian community in Ladakh. In 1988 an LBA agitation targeted them for the alleged 'kidnapping' of Buddhist children by a missionary group from Mizoram who had established a Christian school in Srinagar.
remembered that it is in this period that the armed resistance in Kashmir proper was gathering momentum. Hence, the seasonal traders from Kashmir, mostly vegetable and souvenir sellers, could be accused of bringing "the secessionist culture of the valley into this strategically important region of the State." Reference was made time and again to pro-secessionist slogans raised in Leh bazaar and the need for the government to chase 'Pakistani agents' from Ladakh. All this enabled the LBA to position itself as patriotic and non-communal, and strengthened its ability to gain the sympathy of not only Central authorities, but also wide sections of the media. A LPMUT spokesman said at a press conference in Delhi that "excluding Sunni Muslims with terrorist connections, all other communities supported their agitation. He particularly referred to the Kargil area dominated by the Shia Muslims. The Shia Muslims are also aggrieved against the domination of the Sunni settlers from Kashmir who have complete control over all the major economic activities."

A booklet entitled Ladakh People's Movement for Union Territory Status: an Information Booklet, printed in Delhi, was widely disseminated among press and politicians. The parallels between this document and the 1935 Triennial Report of the KRBMS cited earlier are striking. Again, we find Ladakhis, or rather the LBA, presenting their case using government statistics to prove their claim of discrimination, references are made to the patriotism of Ladakhis as opposed to Kashmiris, and so forth. But by this time the guise of the LPMUT can barely be maintained.

A very prominent feature of the LPMUT pamphlet is its singling out of the Sunni Muslims of Leh for criticism, and effectively denying their Ladakhiness. Speaking of the post-Independence period, it says:

"The most unfortunate part was that in all these evil designs the State Government used the Argons (a handful of Sunni Muslims of Kashmiri origin settled in Leh). Acting as Ladakhis they allowed themselves to be used as agents to the Kashmir Government in the execution of all their evil designs. The Government in return made them into rich contractors with apparently a license to deal in wholesale, the future and fortune of Ladakhis. And for their untamed youth, pampered by the state and protected by the law, it has become usual to assault Buddhist youths and molest (sic) women. These elements ( . . . ) led Ladakh into a major communal conflicts in July last, when after a well planned assault on a Buddhist youth they went on to stone at the peacefully protesting demonstrations from the Mosque building." (Ladakh Peoples Movement for Union Territory Status, 1989: 4 emphasis added)

The pamphlet reiterates the by now familiar themes. The trouble in Ladakh is dubbed "unfortunate for this strategically sensitive region of Ladakh, but also an insult to the nation as a whole," thereby claiming non-Sunni patriotism. Also, the theme of Buddhist traditional peacefulness is brought forward: "Today the people of Ladakh realize that the gentleness and tolerance inherent in their age-old culture are being mistaken for cowardice and helplessness." And the "source of all the evils," the "root cause of all the feuds and problems in Leh" is unambiguously identified as "the Kashmir Government." (all quotes from Ladakh Peoples Movement for Union Territory Status, 1989: 4)

In the LPMUT pamphlet, the theme of patriotism is particularly strong. The Sunni Muslims are accused that "they have begun to ape their Kashmiri secessionist brethren by indulging in anti-national activities."

"Pro-Pak activists from the valley have been imported into the district, at their behest to create chaos and subversion. Elements with established links with Kashmiri terrorists, disguised as businessmen, have been indoctrinating the Sunni youth. Pro-Pak slogan shouting has become a day to day affair. Attempts are made to transplant the secessionist culture of the valley into the region. To all such activities, the Government and the police have turned a Nelson's eye. Perhaps, that suits them well!"

The Muslims of Leh, at least in terms of representations, had been slow to respond in an organized manner, it appears. Only in October 1989 a booklet was published seeking to show that, in fact, Ladakhis as a whole have suffered under Kashmir. After first arguing that the agitation, contrary to the claims of the LBA, is indeed targeting the Muslim community as a whole, and listing a series of attacks on Muslim property, the document reproduces two memoranda and a "supporting document" on the "origin and evolution of the Ladakhi Muslims." The first memorandum is from the "Kargil District Action Committee" headed by Agha Sayed Hussain Al-Mousavi:

"When one talks of Ladakh, one is talking of about 1,50,000 people of mixed Indo-Aryan (Dard, Kashmiri and other Indian origin) and Mongoloid descent living along the course of the high Indus and its tributaries; of a people who profess Islam and Buddhism in equal numerical strength and yet speak the same language in

25 A spokesman for the LPMUT in a press conference at Delhi, quoted in Hindustan Times, 8 August, 1989. 26 Hindustan Times, 8 August 1989. It is far beyond the scope of this discussion to go into the divergent origins of Sunni Muslims in Leh, just as it is impossible to address the 'truth value' of the accusations levelled against them and other targets of the LBA. The issue in the present analysis is not whether or not all these accusations, claims, and counterclaims are based on 'reality', but on their reception, deployment, and interpretation. 27 In fact, the draft of the booklet openly states its provenance as LBA, Chokhang Vihara, Leh. The printed version gives the same address, but omits mention of the LBA.
different phonetic forms, share the same cultural roots and life style despite the difference in faith.

2. That in this extensive mountainous region of India more than 75,000 Muslims (estimated) live as widely spread as do the Buddhists is a fact made less known to the world for a variety of partisan political reasons. ( . . . ) Uptill now close inter-caste family associations, especially in Leh, had bound the people of the region as a homogenous group. Alas! the current Buddhist agitation has severely damaged these cohesive traditions.

3. The people outside Ladakh have been given to understand through press briefings by the Ladakh Buddhist Association that the Muslims of Ladakh, particularly the Sunni-Muslims of Leh, are 'outsiders' and 'recent settlers'. In particular some extremist Buddhist ideologues are playing up the DOGRA CONNECTION of the Leh Muslims in the belief that the DOGRA General Zorawar Singh had patronized their settlement in Leh during his Ladakh conquest. But scores of history books written by famous European scholars, indeed the very indigenous 'Ladakh Chronicles' refute this wild and recent theory. These documents bear testimony to the fact that while the earliest 'Balti' (Shia Muslim) settlement had come into being when King Jamyang Namgyal of Ladakh (16th Century) had invited 7 Muslim traders from Kashmir to become his 'Khar-Chog-Pa' or palace traders. And in consequence of the Tibeto-Mongol invasion of Ladakh during 1681, the Ladakhi King built the famous Leh Mosque and he himself had briefly converted to Islam. (. . .) (Muslims of Leh and Kargil, 1989:15-16)

This memorandum, like the booklet as a whole, challenges many of the claims of the LBA, but especially the erasure of Muslims from Ladakhiness. The effect of the booklet was negligible. Few newspapers reported on it, and public opinion outside Kashmir Valley remained effectively controlled by the LBA and its allies.

ST Gained, UT Lost: Towards a Hill Council

On October 8, 1989 the Government made its first concession. Practically the entire population of Ladakh were declared as members of eight Scheduled Tribes. At the same time, the Government appeared to be reluctant to be seen meeting Ladakhi demands. Ladakh's Buddhist leadership feared that the explosive situation in Kashmir was keeping the government from making a gesture that might upset the Valley militants even more. Bakula Rinpoche surmised as much in a letter to the Prime Minister released to the Press in late September 1989. 28 He 'warned that making Ladakhi vital interest

28 Bakula Rinpoche at this time was serving as Member of the National Commission on Minorities. While he played no part in the conception of the agitation, he did constitute an important presence at the Centre. With the deepening of the crisis in Kashmir and the imposition of Governor's rule on the State, the good relations between the three Ladakhis at the Centre (Bakula Rinpoche, the Lok Sabha member and later Minister P.Namgyal, and Lama Lobzang) and leaders of the Congress I were increasingly important.

29 The Sunni Arghons were denied ST status. Their appeal was still under consideration at the time of writing.


31 Thuptsan Sonam, Vice-President, LBA, letter to (J&K) Home Minister Mufti Mohd. Sayeed, 8 June 1990.

32 This social boycott, me len chu len chad in Ladakhi, was imposed by the LBA on all Buddhists in the summer of 1989, banning all interactions with Muslims. This policy was enforced through an elaborate system of informers, and violators were subjected to a scapegoat on this account may not be in the overall national interest.'

The declaration of ST took some of the wind out of the sails of the agitation. For one, press reports began to reflect the local Muslim perspective on the events, pointing towards the privileging of the Buddhists in the ST list. 29 Also, the Government's insistence that granting UT status would prejudice the Indian claim on Kashmir and further fuel the insurrection in the Valley was widely supported in the mainstream press. Nevertheless, as the Hindustan Times noted in an editorial, there was a genuine need for a reform of the region's administrative setup.

Talks held between LBA, LMA, Centre and State on October 29, 1989; were successful. The Central Government and J&K Government agreed to consider an "Autonomous District Hill Council" for the region and would drop all pending cases in connection with the agitation. In return, the LBA suspended the agitation, dropped the demand for a Union Territory and promised to work towards restoring "harmony and brotherhood among the Buddhists and the Muslims and other communities in the region." 30

The Long Wait

The implementation of this Tripartite Agreement was to be delayed until 1995. In June 1990, then Home Minister, Mufti Mohd. Sayeed visited Ladakh and the LBA Vice-President, Tundup Sonam, wrote to him complaining about the lack of progress in implementing the tri-partite agreement, emphasizing once again Ladakhis' patriotism as "sentinels for the nation in four wars." 31 The LBA had reason to be frustrated as the government, at the State and Central level, had not stuck to their part of the deal. However, the LBA, too, had failed to meet its promises, in particular with regard to lifting the social boycott of the Muslims. 32 State and Centre, moreover, were hiding
behind one another’s backs, with the State proclaiming the declaration of a Hill Council beyond the jurisdiction of the State, and the Centre saying that Article 370 prevented it from unilaterally taking a step. In addition, though, the authorities realized that they could not simply ignore the Muslims of the region. The question was how to get out of the deadlock.

After the social boycott had finally been lifted at the end of 1992, the LMA and LBA had come together in the formation of what was called the "Coordination Committee." Among its members were representatives of the Sunni, Shia, Christian and Buddhist population. On 8 September 1992, this Coordination Committee called a press conference to announce an ultimatum to the Government: grant Hill Council by October 15, or the agitation will resume. As always, care was taken to ensure the presence of journalists, and the ultimatum was indeed widely covered. The late Akbar Ladakhi, then president of the LMA, also announced that the LBA had expressed its support for the inclusion of the Sunni Argons in the ST list, further illustrating the now united stand of Leh’s Muslim and Buddhist representatives.

On 9 October 1993, the Central Government announced the successful conclusion of talks with LBA and LMA representatives in New Delhi on the details of the Hill Council Act. Only a few minor issues, such as the name for the council, were left to be resolved. The Leh delegation was received in Ladakh with a victory parade. It soon became apparent that the celebrations were premature, and implementation of the agreement was to take another two years.

In January 1994, P. Namgyal wrote to Home Minister S.B. Chavan noting that it had been "reliably" learnt that the draft bill no longer contained the word ‘autonomous.’ This was unacceptable for the LBA, who were getting impatient with the delay since they had been assured speedy passage of the bill. In April, LBA President Thupstan Chhewang also wrote to S.B. Chavan, warning him that without a Hill Council for Leh, Ladakhis would boycott any attempt at reviving the political process in the State, something the Congress government was desperate to achieve for domestic and international purposes. Angry over the new delays, the LBA and LMA once again jointly threatened to re-launch the agitation on 20 June 1994, and told S.B. Chavan as much during his visit to Leh on the 15th. After assurances by Rajesh Pilot, Minister of State for Internal Security, that the Hill Council issue would be tackled soon, the Coordination Committee agreed to postpone the agitation, but another year passed.

Throughout the summer and early autumn of 1994, the need to demonstrate the commitment to a peaceful resolution of the conflict, and the need to address the concerns of the Muslim community in Ladakh. The mood among the leadership was optimistic, but the final stages of the struggle were far from easy. Having the experience of many unfulfilled promises in the past, Ladakh’s leadership were not in a mood to sit back and wait. Moreover, as Thupstan Chhewang said: "We were suspicious that the Centre would link it up with the overall Kashmir issue, and we feared that if there’s a popular government in Kashmir again, the Hill Council might be shelved permanently, since they have never been particularly sympathetic to giving autonomy to Ladakh." So the agitation was re-launched once more with a mass rally on March 6, 1995.

The ferocity of public sentiment must have stirred the government into action, because one day before a planned Youth March, during which "anything could have happened" as one leader put it, a high level delegation came to Leh with a mandate from the PM to announce that Hill Council would be established within a month. The Ladakhi leadership agreed to de-escalate, but not to suspend the agitation, and gave an ultimatum of May 15 for the law to be passed. A dharna in the main bazaar continued a while longer until, finally, on May 8 the announcement was made that the bill had been passed.

Conclusion

The Indian press and the Governor representing the state could celebrate Ladakh’s Hill Council precisely because Ladakh’s leadership (itself a ‘collective’ of varying and contradictory composition) presented its claims and represented Ladakh within the bounds of the

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35 The following section draws on my "Leh’s Got It!", Himal, July/August 1995.
36 Thupstan Chhewang, personal communication March 1995.
37 ‘Anything’ in this case referred to a carefully planned simultaneous bombing of most important Government offices. It is worth noting that throughout the 1989-1995 period sticks of dynamite were set off every now and then to keep the authorities aware of the continuation of the agitation. Public rallies in Leh in March 1995 signified a new strategic development in that for the first time anti-Central government slogans were raised. At two rallies a red banner was carried with Chinese characters. According to one of the people behind that particular initiative, the characters simply stated that ‘We want our Rights,’ or something to that effect. Obviously, such a banner was intended as a severe provocation to the Government. One LBA leader referred to the use of this banner as ‘childish and stupid’ as it served no purpose and damaged the LBA’s image as true patriots.

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fines, and other punishments, including physical violence.
33 See e.g. Hindustan Times, 9 September 1993; Indian Express, 10 September 1993.
rules of the game: patriotic, democratic, and secular. How else could the state have celebrated its loss of power?

The use of a communal strategy, interspersed with non-communalized all-Ladakh representations, demands, claims, and justifications, shows how a particular field of politically recognizable idioms and practices was structuring decisions, strategies, and actions in Ladakh. This negotiation and contestation of the limits of the (politically) possible (and imaginable) has enabled and constrained Ladakh options, as well as 'outside' ones. Similarly, this contested construction of a new political-administrative structure for Ladakh has itself become available for other local movements in other parts of India, transforming the field of politics and Centre-State-local relations. Already in the summer of 1995 the Zangskar Buddhist Association launched an agitation modelled clearly on the LBA strategy and rhetoric, claiming discrimination by Kashmir and Muslim-dominated Kargil district, and demanding a separate Hill Council for the area.

The question remains whether this development of devolution of power to local-decision making bodies, is in itself a positive development, or not. A straightforward answer is not possible. While the Hill Council offers a chance to Ladakhi political leaders to formulate and implement policies that they deem suitable or desirable for Ladakh, its conception is based on a communalized political frame whose logic of fragmentation has no logical or necessary end. The Hill Council was achieved at the cost of constructing and enforcing a conception of Ladakhiness that leaves space for Muslims only as an expression of the tolerance of the real Ladakhis: Buddhists. More importantly, the intra-Buddhist homogeneity that the communalist frame posits and indeed requires, is not to be found in Ladakh. The issues that gave rise to the demand for regional autonomy, namely the dislocations and perceived discriminations in the context of livelihoods, remain unaddressed through the Hill Council per se. In fact, it is precisely its acceptance of both the representational logic of the nation-state’s project and its modernizing (and now globalizing) developmentalist project that made possible the ‘success’ of the Hill Council agitation.

Ladakh’s leadership, both in communal and all-Ladakh agitations, successfully represented themselves as true patriots, depicting the Kashmir government as communalists and the population as secessionists. To grant Ladakhis what they demanded, then, could be justified within the terms of the national project of development and the integrity of the nation’s territory. Even in the communal period of the 1989 agitation, the LBA positioned itself as communalist against its will, merely defending the Buddhists against the communalists from Kashmir. As a poster proclaimed: “May it be known to all that there is one source of all evils: Kashmir govt. & its agents in Leh; one solution to all the problems: free Ladakh from Kashmir. One goal, one demand of all the people.” Autonomy for Ladakh could be justified quite comfortably in the terms of the nation’s own understanding of itself: democratic, secular and dedicated to the development of the entire nation. With the rise of armed rebellion in Kashmir and the increasing virulence of Hindu nationalism and anti-Muslim sentiment in other parts of India, Ladakh’s Buddhist leaders saw their chance of success in playing the communal card for all its worth. This also reflected the commonly held perception that ‘the system’ is communal, so there is no alternative. Leh now has its Autonomous Council, earned through decades of struggle and a carefully crafted strategy of representations of Ladakh as backward, neglected, yet populated (mostly) by patriots. The demand was, after all, reasonable, justifiable. Whether it will make any difference in terms of peoples’ lives, remains to be seen.

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