

Understanding the Transformation in Ladakh

Issues, Threats and Early Warnings

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Local populace, especially Buddhists, have raised voices of dissent against successive governments of the State in J&K from time to time and sought direct central administration. This dissent exacerbated into a full scale agitation with communal flare ups in 1989; following Union government's intervention, State government agreed to grant a semi-autonomous body called Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council in 1993 to the Leh district, which came into effect in 1995. However, there was little awareness in Kargil about its functions; hence it took 10 years for people of Kargil to feel the need to replicate this model of governance in their district.

What are the new challenges/issues in Ladakh? How to address them?

I

LADAKH

UNDERSTANDING THE POLITICS IN LEH AND KARGIL DISTRICTS

With the inception of the Hill Councils, new roads and buildings sprung up, accountability in developmental works improved, rural infrastructure got better, and people actively took part in the initiatives taken at Hill Council level. At the same time these institutes also took centre-stage of politics in both the districts.

Politics in Kargil is deeply entrenched in a social debate about re-conciling Shi'ite religiosity with the changes brought about by modernity. The two powerful religious factions - Islamia School and the Imam Khomeini Memorial Trust (IKMT), divided over this issue, have sustained their overwhelming clout over society through politics in playing out the local democracy. Agha, Sheikh, Kacho, Munshi are religious heads and families respectively predominant names in the local power struggle. Miniscule Buddhist population from Zaskar and some other parts of Kargil have found expression in the Council through reserved seats among the 26 elected and four nominated seats of Councillors on the pattern of Leh Hill Council where minority population of Muslims has reserved seats.

Azghar Ali Karbalai, the dynamic leader of the opposition and also founder member of the IKMT however, as the Chief Executive Councillor his take on overhauling the system cost his party (supported by INC) losing power in the Hill Council to NC party

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led by Kamar Ali Akhon (presently, J&K Cabinet Minister). Hassan Khan, a proven leader of the NC, won the MP election to represent Ladakh in the Parliament defeating his nearest rival P Namgyal of the INC from Leh. In this way, Ladakh saw a legacy of Congress and NC party rules with former having its stronghold in Buddhist dominated Leh and later in Kargil with majority Shi'ite Muslims. Sharing one MP, has made the two districts - Leh and Kargil up against each other; religious sentiment play a major role, as a trump card for the political parties in fray.

Coalition politics at State and Centre had ripple effects in Ladakh. Power struggles within each district provided for a strong multiparty assertions. The contest for sole MP seat, for the first time after bifurcation of Ladakh into two districts, was no more purely between Leh and Kargil, but between INC and Ladakh Union Territory Front (LUTF). Further, the majority of Kargil vote was divided between the NC and Karbalai led independent party.

In Leh, politics primarily, revolve around the popular demand for Union Territory status. Significant manifestation of this demand, in the recent times, was the formation of the Ladakh Union Territory Front (LUTF) under the leadership of erstwhile Congress leader Thupstan Chhewang. His attempt to call for disbanding political parties to be united under the LUTF banner, gave him an emphatic victory in MP elections in 2002 over Hassan Khan from Kargil. However, this received a setback, soon after its launch in 2002, with BJP and Congress reviving their parties.

The LUTF swept the Hill Council election in 2004; the win was considered to be on the grounds of sympathy votes in the favour of LUTF, which faced - as voters were convinced on to believe - stark betrayal from dissidents causing split in the UT Front. The defeats, however, in the hands of INC in the subsequent Hill Council by-elections and later in the contest for MLA (between Congress candidate Nawang Rigzin Jora and Thupstan Chhewang) in Leh came as a major setback to LUTF, which is now struggling to keep the remaining members together.

II

BEYOND THE DISTRICT POLITICS THE CLASH OF PERSONALITIES

Both Congress and LUTF claim and counter claim that it is their party which has always stood for UT. While the Congress boast of its legacy from the time of late Kushok Bakula, the LUTF reassert as the true regional representation in view of alleged discriminative stances adopted by Governments. Inherent in the above politics is the clash of personal egos, among the top leadership in their power struggle.

The political rallies at the Leh Polo ground by both the parties' exhibit in full public display the degree of their clash of interests. Some dissidents on both sides were seen indulging in unabashed blatant personal attacks/counterattacks in their respective public gatherings setting up a bad precedent for younger generation to follow. This trend of exhuming political bitterness in public started after the controversial exit of Congress leaders - to revive their party - from one-party-for-all LUTF, which was formed by disbanding all major parties including NC, INC and BJP in a brisk developments during the 2002 MLA elections.

Congress party had given their mandates for two MLA seats in Leh and Nubra to Tsering Dorje, current CEC of LAHDC Leh, and P Namgyal, former Union Minister. Meanwhile, Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) led by its President Tsering Samphel, currently Member of ST Commission of the Government of India, was carrying out a series of public campaigns for UT status. When Round Table Conferences were being held during 2007, the LBA felt the need to conglomerate all parties to exert pressure on Centre over this demand in one voice. In the ensuing meetings at Chokhang Vihara, however, there was a call from the NC party to disband the parties altogether to which then



Leh Fort

Congress President Thupstan Chhewang readily agreed and with other party members complying Ladakh Union Territory Front (LUTF) was formed to strive for UT status under one banner.

Later on, LUTF decided to field Nawang Rigzin Jora and Pintoo Narboo as MLAs from Leh and Nubra instead of Mr. Namgyal and Mr. Dorjay on account of sending more articulate representatives to raise UT at state level. In absence of any opposition both the candidates were elected uncontested from the respective constituencies.

Such unprecedented development did manage to draw lot of media attention at the national level towards the local UT struggle, however, soon internal frictions started surfacing among the erstwhile members from different political backgrounds, and its President Thupstan Chhewang was having a tough time to keep them together.

Meanwhile, by virtue of united Leh under the LUTF banner Mr. Chhewang won over Hassan Khan of Kargil in the 2002 MP elections; the Leh Polo ground witnessed perhaps the largest crowd gathered with their leaders to celebrate this crucial win. Unfortunately, this unity was not there to last long.

In the midst of increasing internal frictions, the infamous split in the LUTF occurred with some Congress members announcing revival of their party. BJP had already been formed much earlier. Congress-PDP government after the fresh Assembly elections at the State gave cabinet berth to Nawang Rigzin Jora, who had showed his allegiance to Azad-led Congress party. The PDP-Congress coalition government took some significant steps in empowering Hill Council including cabinet status to CEC with disbursing up to five crore rupees and to the ECs status equivalent to State's deputy Ministers and increased perks.

This move did not help much in filling the wounds left by the split and in earning public favour in the ensued Hill Council elections swept by LUTF party. Of 26 elected seats Congress regained only two seats from Chushot and Skyu-Markha constituencies. Congress leaders blamed LUTF of using three Ms 'Money, Muscle and Monks' to snatch this victory from their hands, and the rift between the two parties deepened resulting into an era of great political turmoil that also brought under its garb Ladakh Buddhist Association, that



witnessed violent clashes among two rival groups before the peaceful settlement of issues such as election of its President.

Repercussions of such animosity had significant impact on development as well. This feud at many times put at stake the operation of smooth developmental activities. With the two parties at loggerhead, evidences of bureaucratic highhandedness superseding Hill Council started appearing. The controversial ouster of LUTF councillor Tsewang Rigzin from the party and EC Education post under the pressure from Education Department staff and leveling charges against SECMOL, an NGO that brought considerable reforms in education system, as 'anti-national' by DC Leh were all unfortunate incidents took place around the time when Congress and LUTF were up against each other.

Former DC Leh M K Dwivedi had also issued unceremonious order against all NGOs to produce their complete documents in his office, which led to stalling of the projects such as Watershed Scheme these NGOs had undertaken in various parts of Ladakh. A councillor from Sakti constituency Gyal Wangyal along with his associates during the Council by-elections was beaten in police lock up for allegedly extorting donations from non-local traders.

Party feuds at such a scale stem from personality clashes among political stalwarts, and party level comprehension that there are elements behind the scene active in propagating division to wrest power in their favour. An interesting observation during the recent political developments was the expressions of an entrenched class struggle, between two higher

classes - Skutags (royal) and Tongpa (common families) of Ladakh society, being used openly in political forum as Congress leaders led by Rigzin Jora accused Mr. Chhewang of harbouring intentions to subjugate commoners by regaining the traditional prowess of Skutags.

The vehement campaign by Congress party on such lines, coupled with what they call 'inefficient' Hill Council under LUTF, did prove effective in the Council by-election of lower Leh that went in favour of INC. Mr. Chhewang also had to face defeat in the MLA elections and the majority vote going in favour of Mr. Rigzin Jora indicated the resurgence of Congress party after an interlude spanning over three to four years since 2002.

After all the high voltage drama of creating one political brand of UT Front for all and in no time causing split in it, close allies turning into arch rivals, has definitely left people in quandary over who should be trusted or distrusted. Even greater concern is the danger of real issue of development getting sidelined at the cost of bitter politics for personal gains.

III EARLY WARNINGS EMERGING ISSUES & IMPENDING PROBLEMS

It is important to note, suddenly Ladakh is facing numerous problems, which was once unknown to

this land of a great cultural heritage. Stories about burglary, murder, suicides have become a common phenomena in recent years; rise in unemployment despite having tourism and other business potentials has not prompted anyone to react on this burgeoning puzzle. Another concern is migration from villages to Leh city, which is facing onslaught of population influx meandering in the streets of shrinking and stinking town. More and more abandoned agricultural lands, irrigation channels, streams and springs are drying up the problems are endless for leaders and policy makers to think upon and act.

In the midst of myriad of complexes created over Kashmir issue, the real and basic concerns have somehow faded into oblivion leaving common people in a fix and vulnerable to temptations. Radicalization in younger generations seen in different parts of the J&K State, could be a sign of 'chronic' deprivation of creative opportunities for personal achievements that deviates young minds into an agitated state and grow distrust for other communities.

In fact J&K, given the continuous political turmoil right from the beginning, is marred with corruption and nepotism. It is the failure of successive governments irrespective of any party affiliation to deliver effectively with transparency and accountability. Genesis of the problem may be the whole issue of dispute over the prescribed status Kashmir sans people's support, that provided a nurturing ground for political parties to exploit public sentiments on regional and religious lines. It would not be exaggeration to say that the whole issue of Kashmir is a Governance issue, and all the three regions Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh of the J&K State became a victim to this - from extremist stance of militancy in the valley to radicalization and communal flare ups in other two regions.

As far as Ladakh, and particularly Leh, is concerned the journey on the road to development infested with disarrayed progress, since independence and wresting the administrative control to Kashmir division, can be described in simple terms as a journey from dignified, self sustained society to a highly dependent population on subsidized ration supply; from an all-engaging co-operative society to groups of jobless people wandering aimlessly; from a peaceful, harmonious society to increasingly radicalized groups; from a clean environment to garbage heaps; and finally from beautiful and



Local Market in Leh

practical mud buildings to mushrooming clusters of concrete cement structures.

IV THE ROAD AHEAD RECOMMENDATIONS

What has happened in the name of development? People had great hope when the Hill Council status was granted. Though establishing a decentralized governing body at the district brought about significant changes, it failed to address the larger issue of planning with a broad vision. The Council continued to follow the blueprint of development, being implemented under a rigid administrative system for decades, without doing or undoing changes needed as per suited to the local topography. This where, there is a need to emphasis on development planning.

Development Planning in Leh and Kargil

Trends like alienation of youth from the land based economy, co-existence of youth unemployment with import of labour from outside, increasing demand for government jobs, and dependence on a variety of finished products from outside compared to export of the bulk of the limited range of local produces (like Pashmina from Ladakh) point towards the inadequacy of the policy locally as well as at the State level.

An analysis of the District Budgets of Leh and Kargil, would reveal that the bulk of the annual allocation and allocations under 11th Five-Year-Plan are being spent on infrastructure development, while economy and social themes seem to have remained always neglected with meager funds under the relevant sectors. In addition funding under Centrally Sponsored Schemes (like IAY, BADP, WDP, PMGSY, NREGA, etc.) and other sources (e.g. grants from State Plan, Untied Grants, 12th FC grants, transfers by SFC, Externally Supported Schemes, Loans, etc.), estimated to be around 30-40 crores per annum, are primarily invested in infrastructure development. Little over 10 percent of the annual budget is spent in twelve sectors - Economy including Agriculture, Horticulture, Sheep Husbandry, Fisheries, Animal Husbandry, Tourism, Industries, Handlooms, Handicrafts, Employment, SGSY and Cooperatives. Linked with this is the strikingly low level of



investment in higher/technical/vocational educations, a little above 1 percent, with annual allocations.

Even more pathetic is the allocation of a mere one percent of the budget to the Arts and Culture, Social Welfare, Labour Welfare, Planning/Evaluations and Statistics, and Information and Information Technology with no external support. On overview of the District Plan document laid out for 58 developmental sectors categorized under different themes clearly indicates the glaring pitfalls in the existing planning and highlight the complete of lack of practicality and visioning. Ironically, it seems that every year, perhaps during the last 50 years, same pattern of development have been followed unmindful of the fact that local demands, needs and other dynamics are changing from time to time and from region to region.

In view of the impracticality of the existing budget allocation, it becomes highly imperative to review the pattern of investment. While the existing level of investment in Basic Services may have to be continued in future as well, there is a real possibility of reducing the use of District Plan's own resources on infrastructure development (including the bulk of agricultural infrastructure and 'rural development') by making efficient use of GOI's flagship programs and various other sources. The combined potential of Centrally Sponsored Schemes of GOI, National 'Missions' of GOI and other sources of funding should enable District Plans to relocate large share of their own resources to sectors of economic and social development and even linking the remaining infrastructure building work strongly with objectives of economic development.

There are ample opportunities in every region and district for taking economic development to new heights. For example, in Ladakh, the potential in cultivation of vegetables, seabuckthorn, fodder and medicinal plants, dairy development, handicrafts industry, IT based industry, HRD in tourism, food processing technology and vocational/technical education in the fields of relevance are yet to be put to use effectively.

The growing unemployment and other serious problems looming large over the future of younger generations call for shedding rigidness in the planning process, and enable it to respond to changes and to innovate. It is time we learn from other state, which have taken giant leaps forward in economic sectors leaving J&K, especially, the trans-Himalayan region Ladakh region far behind the rest in the 21st century of modernity and globalization.

Article 370 and its impact on development

Article 370, conferred upon the erstwhile princely State of J&K a special status with its own constitution. Even as this power has proved as boon to the entire state in many respects particularly ownership of land remaining in the hands of locals, there are debates about the hurdles it has been creating in the pace of development keeping in tandem with the rest of the nation.

Kashmir valley faced militancy for over a decade now, which has undoubtedly left a deep scar in the hearts and minds of the people and impeded growth in the valley, but peaceful regions like Ladakh, by virtue of being an administrative part under the Kashmir division, also fell victim in many ways to this misfortune. For example, J&K lags far behind in implementing novel initiatives taken at national level to strengthen grassroots democracy.

NREGA is increasingly being recognized as becoming instrumental in poverty alleviation and development of rural agricultural infrastructure through out the country; however, J&K State stands very low in the NREGA ranking. This could be attributed to the absence of Panchayati Raj Institution, which is assigned as key institution to plan and implement the GOI's flagship scheme. During the five years term of Panchayati Raj in J&K (2001 – 2006), there were visible changes in villages of Leh with enthusiastic Sarpanches and Panches at the grassroots taking full responsibility to develop their own villages and hamlets despite half-hearted empowerment of this governing system in J&K.

The government, evasive of holding the next round of elections, replaced this grassroots institution with a least representative Monitoring Committee on pretext of militancy in Kashmir, however, unaffected and peaceful regions like Ladakh also had to bear the brunt leading to disillusionment and a sense of neglect among the people in Ladakh. Tsering Wangyal, former Sarpanch from Shey village was right to point out that it is hard to comprehend such mismanagement of the affairs.

It is indeed hard to understand why every decision made by the government has to be blanketed across the State unmindful of the regional dynamics. It is hard to know why ground realities of different parts of the State are not taken into consideration in policy decisions at the governmental level. Perhaps inherent in this bitter truth is the cause of dissent among Ladakhis prompting them to demand separation from J&K and seek direct Central Administration. A young student from Ladakh in Delhi - Tsetan Angmo asked why J&K never had a CM from Ladakh; she even went to the extent of saying that Ladakh has no influence at all in the political arenas at State and National levels attributed to miniscule population and to our different physical features and cultural affiliations.

And perhaps inherent in this is the root cause of internal frictions and communal flare ups as Dr. Aggarwal, author of Beyond the LoC, rightly points out, "Ladakh is a multicultural region. Its location in the strife-torn region of Jammu and Kashmir has created significant constraints on its multicultural heritage in the last three decades...At the same time, the Kashmir dispute has extracted a considerable toll from Ladakhi society, resulting in strained relations, alienation, and even violence among different religious and ethnic groups."

Once an independent kingdom, Ladakh has always been relegated to a peripheral status, whether it was under Maharaja's rule or later to be a part of J&K State and it continues to suffer its marginalized state at the hands of State Govt. Citizenry of Ladakh are hardworking in nature given the right opportunities available to them, and they have a very high sense of morality inherent in its socio-religious tradition, however, this handful of people are unwillingly getting moulded into a system which tops in the ranking of Most Corrupt States' list of India as per a recent survey.