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# More Religious and Less Moral: The Changing Face of Religious Coexistence in Ladakh

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## **More Religious and Less Moral:**

### **The Changing Face of Religious Coexistence in Ladakh**



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## Abstract

Ladakh hosts a mixed population of Buddhists and Muslims that belies its popular image as a solely Buddhist replica of Tibet. Despite its unique history of religious integration, new pressures linked to globalisation are pulling the communities apart, with occasional and previously unheard-of communal conflict breaking out in recent decades. Through a comparison of historical and primary sources alongside first hand observation, this project traces the effects of external religious forces, the communal style of Indian politics, and the pressures of 'development' upon the local reality of religious coexistence in Ladakh. Despite the largely harmonious environment, it is clear that the foundations of a common Ladakhi identity are being undermined in favour of increasingly communalist, religious definitions of self. As well as providing an insight into the contemporary face of religion in the region, the Ladakhi situation offers a framework through which to examine the role of globalised forces upon the cohesiveness of local communities.

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*'On the one hand people are becoming more knowledgeable about their religions, yet they act worse in everyday life.'* - Abdul Ghani Sheikh

*'Communal harmony and peace is the foundation of the culture of Ladakh.'* - Tsewang Daljor

Ladakh<sup>1</sup> lies at the political, religious and cultural focal point of central Asia. The huge Tibetan plain sits to the east; India to the south; Pakistan and Afghanistan stretch westward. Ladakh's political borders have changed beyond recognition since the onset of the nation-state in the previous century and a half; now part of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, it's an important military base on the border of Pakistan and Chinese-controlled Tibet. For much of the past millennium however, Ladakh has hosted independent kingdoms located at the crossroads of important trade routes stretching across Asia. Culturally, Ladakhis are Tibetanoid, speaking a language descended from Tibetan and sharing similar diets, clothing and architecture to their Eastern neighbours. And yet the population is divided equally between Muslims and Buddhists, making Ladakhis the only Tibetanoid people to have converted to Islam en masse (Akester). These two religious communities have coexisted peacefully for centuries, sharing a language and lifestyle at the geographical meeting point of the two religions. In the past several decades however, emerging pressures, both local and external, have begun to pull the communities apart, and given rise to new, communalist tendencies.

These pressures, inseparable from the wider challenges posed to Ladakhi lifestyle by its integration into India, subsequent 'development', and increasing connection with an interconnected modern world, are changing the face of religious coexistence in the region. Based upon a month and a half of fieldwork in Leh and Kargil districts, this paper will trace the origin of these pressures and the change in relations between Ladakhi Muslims and Buddhists, arguing that despite today's relatively peaceful situation, globalised religious forces, the 'communal idiom of Indian politics', and the pressures of modernisation threaten to reshape Ladakh's unique tradition of religious coexistence (Bray, *"Old Religions"* 10). While many readers may have never even heard of Ladakh, the insight into the effects of globalisation and interconnectivity upon local identity that it provides is relevant to all.

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<sup>1</sup> Given that the area of Ladakh has undergone numerous political transformations and been referred to with a variety of names throughout history, this paper will refer to the entire area currently named Ladakh by that name, even for periods when such a territory did not exist or had a different name.

### A Brief History of Islam in Ladakh

Ask ten Ladakhis about the history of Buddhism and Islam in Ladakh and you will receive ten different answers. In the context of recent political developments (addressed later), the cultural-religious history of Ladakh has become an increasingly charged subject. Is it Tibetan? Buddhist? Mongol, Mon and Daath? Sometimes these answers reflect genuine historical ambiguities, other times lack of education or folk histories, and occasionally an intentional mis-remembering of history for contemporary political ends. Attempts are often made to paint the history of Ladakh as solely and exclusively Buddhist, while Western 'academic interest and popular imagination' has invariably focused on the region's Buddhist tradition, substituting Ladakh for an off-limits Tibet (Van Beek 13). And yet while the region does have a long and rich Buddhist history (the teachings of the Buddha arrived there before Tibet), the evidence from the last half millennium points to a culture influenced and shared by both Buddhist and Muslim communities (Akester).

The spread of Islam in the region was a gradual process that began around the end of the first millennium with increasing Arab control of Central Asia (Sheikh 68). From that time onwards, Ulamas and Sufi scholars travelled to Baltistan, Kashmir and Ladakh, preaching and converting locals to Islam (68). While conversion in Ladakh itself seems to have been minimal until the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries (when Muslim names begin to appear in the histories), the overall changes can be viewed in the context of 'the decaying Buddhism of India' and the increasing 'spiritual strength' of Islam in Central Asia (69). As Akester observes, the spread of Islam in Ladakh began in the same period as the rise of the Gelugpa School in Tibet, a renaissance that can be interpreted partially as a reaction to the competing spiritual influence of Islam. In this context, Ladakh constituted a religious frontline in which Sufis from the Persian world and Buddhist missionaries from the Tibetan sphere competed for adherents.

Through migration and conversion, Islam continued to spread in Ladakh over the next half millennium. The defeat and subsequent marriage of King Jamyang Namgyal to the daughter of the Balti King in the 17<sup>th</sup> century paved the way for the construction of mosques in Leh, and established the tradition of the dynasty's Muslim 'Royal Musicians' (Sheikh 70). Under the Namgyal dynasty, several Kashmiri Muslim traders were given land in Leh, and over the next several centuries large numbers of Muslim traders from Kashmir, Punjab, Afghanistan and other parts of India and Central Asia migrated to Ladakh, often settling and marrying local Buddhists (73). Today the population is divided almost exactly in half, with Shia Muslims constituting the majority in the western district of Kargil, while Leh district in the east remains largely Buddhist.



## A Shared Culture

### *Leh*

While this truncated history presents a general timeframe of the spread of Islam in Ladakh, it does not reflect the peaceful cohabitation and lack of religious conflict that characterised it. The proximity in which Buddhists and Muslims have lived is apparent from a simple stroll around the old town in Leh city. Residences of old Muslim families wrap themselves around Buddhist stupas; houses gifted to Kashmiri traders by Buddhist Kings combine Kashmiri-styled doorways and facades with traditional Ladakhi windows; even the Leh palace itself, one of the architectural masterpieces of the Tibetan cultural world, was designed and built by Chandan Singge Ali, a Balti Muslim (Stanzin; Sheikh 76).

This visual testament to a shared culture is also reflected in written sources. A particularly striking example is that of the Muslim Khwaja family, who led the triennial *Lopchak*<sup>2</sup> mission, a caravan carrying tribute from Ladakh to Lhasa (Sheikh 71; Bray, “*Readings*” 24). Peopled and officially run by Buddhists, the trade expedition was in fact led by Ladakhi Muslims, a reflection of the ‘symbiotic relationship between the Sunni merchants of Leh and the Buddhist elite’ (Bray 24).

### *Chiktan and Kuksho*

By no means limited to architecture and trade, this integration of religious communities extended through many aspects of Ladakhi culture. While new forces discussed later have consigned certain of these aspects to history books, it still exists in the memory of elder Ladakhis<sup>3</sup>. Chiktan town and its neighbour Kuksho village in Kargil district are often referred to as places in which many elements of traditional Ladakhi culture have been preserved, and as such offer a unique reflection of the historic joint influence of the two religions upon local lifestyles. Now Muslim save one family, Chiktan previously had a mixed population, while Kuksho remains almost evenly divided between Buddhists and Muslim families. In both areas Buddhists and Muslims have lived side by side for generations, sharing diet, dress, and traditions testifying to their Tibetan cultural roots. The whole community would gather to celebrate *Bakston* (wedding) ceremonies, eating, singing and dancing together to

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<sup>2</sup> For any serious scholarly work incorporating non-English vocabulary, the practise of transcribing the non-English words according to sound is woefully inadequate. However, due to the variation in Ladakhi dialects and the use of Urdu script in Kargil, I have unfortunately had to resort to transcription by sound to record Ladakhi terms. Wherever possible the English spelling was obtained from local Ladakhis themselves. Definitions for untranslated terms in common use are provided in the glossary.

<sup>3</sup> Changes recounted by locals were often measured vaguely in generations, or not at all. I have therefore tended away from attempts to record precisely the timeframe of these changes, since in any case it seems to me that the perception of those changes in the minds of locals is more significant than an entirely precise timeline.



Above: The old residence of a Muslim family hugs a Buddhist stupa.

Below: Kashmiri door facades and Ladakhi style windows on the house of Kashmiri trader.



the music of the Ladakhi drum and flute (Sayid). Both communities celebrated the main four seasonal festivals, even those with religious connotations; Kuksho residents described how it was customary for both communities to pay the traditional house visit (*chak*) to the village *Goba* (an appointed head or mayor) before Losar, regardless of whether he was Muslim or Buddhist, while Sheikh reports that both communities gathered to drink Losar *chang* and Eid *chang* together (something to give any contemporary, self-respecting Sheikh the shivers). Similarly, Chiktan elders described how every family used to own a *dzama* (type of large pot) for storing *chang*, a few drops of which would be taken in the event of illness. Culinary practices like this reflect a level of integration unique even in Ladakh; in Kuksho Buddhists and Muslims ate from the same pot, with tied pieces of string used to differentiate halal and non-halal meat, a practise also recounted by residents of Chiktan (Sheikh 227; Anon).

And yet even talking of separate communities is misleading, since in both areas, especially Kuksho, members of both religions lived and practised in the same families, often with mixed names such as Ali Tashi or Gunzes Bir (Mussa; Api). In Kuksho every house used to have its own *lha* (spirit) and corresponding shrine room, with such a lack of distinction in religious practise that Sheikh described a majority of villagers as practising a ‘mixed religion’ combining elements of Buddhism and Islam (Norbu; Sheikh 226). This mixture of religion manifested both in approaches towards illness – elder residents of Chiktan described how Muslims and Buddhists alike would visit the local Amchi (traditional medicine healer) and Akhon (Muslim religious leader), or invite monks from nearby Bodkharbu to perform rituals in the event of prolonged sickness – as well as local superstitions. Until recently Chiktan villagers would honour a great Juniper tree, known as *Shukpa Wangchen* and believed to be a powerful *lha*, by tying string or *khatak* to its branches with their left hand; the story of an old man who took some juniper from the tree for his house and immediately went blind is still told (Husseini). Similarly, the summer festival *Sngola*, in which girls (and boys in Chiktan) would gather bouquets of flowers and, dancing and singing, present them to the local *lha*, was celebrated by the whole community in both areas.

While the unique traditions of these two societies are not necessarily representative of Ladakh in general, they nevertheless reflect a tradition of harmony and integration that has characterised religious coexistence in the region. Despite the multiple military conflicts fought in and around Ladakh over the past half millennium, often between Muslim and Buddhist ruling groups, political identity rarely appears to have been conceived in religious terms (Akester). Ladakhi leaders did not discriminate between Buddhist and Muslim subjects, while the conversion of King Namgyal to Islam as part of the Baltistan-Ladakh war peace settlement (and his continued Buddhist practice after) shows that it was not viewed as a religious conflict (Akester). Indeed, numerous foreign

travellers have made similar observations about religion in the region. Mir Izzet Ullah, a representative of the East India Company, portrayed Ladakhis in 1812 as a 'very mild race, disposed to offer injury to no one, and free from religious intolerance', while Bellew described Kargil residents in 1873 as 'a strange mixture of Buddhist and Mussulman together and apparently quite indifferent to the prejudices of creed which reign so supreme in the country we had left' (qtd. In Sheikh 31, 43).

It is natural to romanticise the past, and it is highly unlikely that several hundred years of conversion, migration and religious cohabitation occurred without some tension and conflict. However, in the light of the above sources Daljor's claim that 'communal harmony and peace is the foundation of the culture of Ladakh' strikes less as idealism and more as accurate remembering. An employee at the Leh branch of the J&K Arts, Language, and Culture Academy, Daljor suggested that Ladakhi religion has a distinct character, and that people (at least in the past) identified primarily with a common Ladakhi identity, as opposed to a wider religious identity (i.e. Ladakhi Muslim/Buddhist, instead of Buddhist/Muslim Ladakhi).

If this really was the case, what about Ladakh proved so conducive to inter-religious coexistence and integration? Akester argues that the tendency to conceptualise conflicts between faiths is a modern development, in which we are inclined to read political conflicts as a clash of religions. While much could be said for this in the post-9/11 context, it seems unsatisfactory given the very large number of historical religious conflicts around the world which were clearly taken as such by contemporaries. Sheikh suggests that the leaders of Purig, Baltistan and Ladakh set examples of religious tolerance that 'helped reduce tensions' and encouraged similar behaviour amongst their subjects (75). While this may indeed have played a role, it seems to me that Daljor's observation about a Ladakhi vs. wider religious identity is the most significant. Ladakh's importance as a pan-Asian trade crossroads belies any suggestion of an isolated region before integration into India, indeed, the Kargil museum boasts an astonishing array of items salvaged from local *caravanserais*, from Kiwi boot polish and communist propaganda to books in English, Farsi, Tibetan, and so on. And yet the nature of pre-industrial travel as well as inhospitable local geography meant that Ladakh was a considerable distance from the centres of the Buddhist and Muslim worlds. With local societies increasingly insulated the farther situated from Leh and Kargil, strictly orthodox teaching could give way to more integrative traditions conducive to peaceful coexistence.

The result in previously remote areas like Chiktan and Kuksho was that the entire concept of religious distinction seems to have been largely lacking. Confounding modern conceptions of religious identity, elderly villagers in Kuksho struggled to answer questions about the religions of specific individuals in mixed-religion families, replying instead that clear distinctions in terms of

religious practise, with Muslims performing certain rituals and Buddhists others, simply hadn't existed (Norbu). Religious practise in general seems to have been less explicit and more personal, with fewer rituals being performed and those that were more often in the home than public places of worship (Norbu, Shakh C). Practices that have become fiercely politicised and even died out in recent decades such as intermarriage and eating food cooked by other communities therefore occurred on a regular basis. While Sheikh's suggestion certainly explains the flourishing of Islam in the capital of Leh, this theory of religious insulation might offer more to explain the reality in areas farther from political authority, and show how the gradual arrival of Islam over several centuries was able to combine with existing Buddhist traditions in such a unique way.

### A Religious Landscape transformed

This unique tradition of religious integration in Chiktan and Kuksho no longer exists. The current situation in Ladakh is complex and still largely harmonious, but fundamental changes have occurred in the past century, especially the last three decades. The lack of distinction between groups has been replaced by a clear separation in terms of religious identity, while mixed names and families no longer exist. This separation has of course manifested through religious practise – *namaz* are performed more regularly, and in the mosque instead of at home; young people are unaware Muslim houses ever had *lhakangs*; and offerings are no longer made to *Shukpa Wanghchen* in Chiktan – but also seems to have pervaded many other aspects of the shared tradition that set the region apart, from clothing and diet to festivals. Instead of the traditional Ladakhi *gos*, a relative of the Tibetan *chuba*, Muslims in Chiktan and Kuksho – women and elder men especially – are now more likely to be seen in the *kandres*, a cultural import variously described by locals as Islamic, Balti and Afghani, or the Kashmiri *phiran*. Similarly, the turquoise necklaces sported by senior Ladakhi ladies – previously universally owned in Chiktan – are no longer worn in the town, and by few of the Muslims in Kuksho (while still common among the Buddhist community) (Hussein). Similar differences were anecdotally reported concerning culinary habits (and universally backed up by the author’s experience), with Buddhists in Kuksho claiming that Muslims now eat mainly bread- and rice-based meals (recent arrivals from India) instead of traditional Ladakhi dishes like *thukpa*, *skyu* and *kholak*. Tongue in cheek comments made by Buddhists that not drinking *chang* and eating all meat caused the facial differences between ethnically Tibetanoid Buddhists and Afghani/Aryan Muslims nevertheless reflects how something as simple as dietary difference has led to an increasing perception of distinction between the communities.

An even more dramatic change in dietary practise is that most Muslims in the area will no longer eat food cooked by non-Muslims, a stipulation with implications for everything from house visits to the giving of gifts and celebration of festivals. Nor is that the only change to the celebration of festivals; non-religious singing, dancing, and the playing of music are now taught to be *haram* and no longer feature in Muslim weddings (Sayid). As a result folkdances have disappeared from *Saka Dafangs*, Chiktan’s biggest festival celebrating the end of winter, with younger villagers completely unaware the festival ever consisted of more than archery (Mussa; Sayid). Similarly, while Kuksho residents are unusual in still celebrating the four traditional seasonal festivals, local Muslims no longer sing and dance but participate by watching, such as in the *Sngola* festival mentioned above (Norbu). Even the tradition of both communities in Kuksho doing *chak* before Losar is reported to have died out in the last ten years. In Chiktan these cultural and religious changes mirrored the conversion of all but one family to Islam, with the crumbling *chortens* and destruction of the local



Left: *Shukpa Wangchen*, the ancient Juniper said to be a powerful *lha*.

Right: The remnants of Chiktan's Buddhist *gonpa*, pillaged for building materials after the town's conversion.



Below: A crumbling *chorten* next to a sign for Muharram. In the background, the remains of Chiktan fort, built by the same Balti architect as Leh Palace.



*gonpa* for building materials (a fate that has also befallen the historic Chiktan fort) standing as physical testament to changing practices. In Kuksho, the changes have simply resulted in a clear distinction between the two communities, with mixed families and intermarriage consigned to the past.



## Truly Global Religion

The religious landscape of Chiktan and Kuksho has been undeniably transformed, but what is behind that transformation and what are its implications for Ladakh's tradition of coexistence? Just as that unique tradition was credited to religious insulation in a pre-industrial world above, so each of the factors behind its transformation are directly related to Ladakh's 'development' and increasing connections with India and the world beyond. Perhaps the most obvious and dramatic influence upon local Kargili religion has been greater connectivity with external religious centres, above all Iran since its emergence as a global centre for Shia Islam in the late 70's. It has always been the tradition and requirement for Shakhs to study in Iraq or Iran before returning to teach in Ladakh; indeed, with Sufis having originally introduced Islam to the region this spiritual connection goes back centuries. Historically however, the extreme distance and difficulty of the journey naturally limited the number of Shakhs practising in Ladakh, especially in remoter areas like Chiktan or Kuksho (Apo). Modern transport infrastructure has changed this reality dramatically.

An aspiring Shakh from Ladakh travelling to study in Iraq in the 1970's – the main centre of Shia learning in the Middle East before the Iranian revolution – would have travelled by road from Kargil to Srinagar (a connection only constructed in the late 60's), and then to Jammu, Delhi, and finally Mumbai. After waiting ten days in Mumbai for a boat ticket, one would then sail for twelve days and nights before reaching Iraq. This exhaustive journey, lasting at least one month, would have to be covered by the personal expenditure of the traveller (Shakh B). Only twenty years later, a journey of the same purpose was unrecognisable. Travelling to study in Iran in the mid-90's, one would simply fly from Leh to Delhi and on to Tehran (Shakh A). A Shakh who made the journey recounted bringing 30,000 Indian Rupees for the entire (7 year) trip, of which 10,000 was for airfare. Upon arriving in Iran, a scholarship established by Ayatollah Khomeini provided a monthly stipend to all students of Islam, apparently irrespective of their religion. While this Shakh described having to return after the expiry of his visa, others who had made the trip in recent years suggested visas are now offered for as long as the student wants to study (Shakh C). The distance between Ladakh and these centres of Islamic teaching has radically decreased, and as result the number of Kargilis making the journey has rocketed in the last three to four decades. The *Jamia Tol Ulama Madrasa Isna Sharia* (which translates roughly as United Shia School for Ulama, and is known as the Islamia college) in Kargil town now sends 20-60 students to Iran every year, and they described their student body as decreasing slightly since more now go directly to the Middle East to study (Shakh D).

As a result of this new connectivity, increasing numbers of Shakhs have spread throughout Kargil over the past several decades, so that every village with a Muslim population (and even some

without!) now has a Shakh and corresponding *masjid*. The number of recently renovated and constructed *masjid* and *Imambara* testifies to this change; although many look for external financial support to explain this increase in *masjid*, the increasingly explicit religiosity of locals in hand with higher levels of wealth means that greater community funding has also played a role (Shakh B). Increased conversion and the separation of religious communities was directly attributed to the arrival of Shakhs by villagers; a Buddhist in Kuksho from a previously mixed-religion family described how members of his family explicitly converted to Buddhism or Islam after a *maulvi* came to the village and proclaimed that both religions could not coexist under one roof (Api; Norbu). The episode reveals two interesting points. Firstly, the *maulvi* supposedly didn't pressure individuals to convert to Islam, simply insisting that two religions couldn't coexist in same family. This focus on 'pure' religion is a clear step in the direction of today's focus on orthodox religious practise. Secondly, while his father and one brother converted to Islam, he was encouraged by the same father to convert to Buddhism so that the family *chodkang*, butter lamps, prayer books and rituals might be kept (Norbu). This suggests that conversion and separation occurred more as a result of these external pressures than from a strong belief in the superiority of one religious ideology over the other, something suggested by villagers in Chiktan also (Husseini).

New teachings on music, dancing and diet have been facilitated not only by the increase in number of Shakhs, but also by Iran's greater activities as an exporter of religious ideology (in contrast to its Iraqi predecessor). The increasing influence of Iranian religious authorities in South Asian Shia communities has been facilitated through multiple channels (Pinault 293). In Ladakh, Kargil town constitutes a 'centre for Shia *tabligh* (religious, educational and missionary activities)', and hosts the Imam Khomeini Memorial Trust, an organisation formed in '89 to propagate the 'principles and values set by the late Imam Khomeini' (Pinault 298; "Imam" 11). The organisation, which now has eleven offices throughout Kargil, has established multiple Islamic Theology Centres, modern schools and health centres, and organises religious festivals and activities ("Imam" 19-21). Although employees at the Trust were vague about finances, conceding only that financial support 'might' be available from Iran for local religious organisations, Pinault suggests that much of the *tabligh* in Kargil has indeed been 'funded by the Iranian government' (298). It seems unlikely that the large number of newly constructed *masjid*, *Imambara* and even the 60 year old Islamia College have proliferated with purely local support (Shakh D).

Local organisations like the Trust increasingly form part of a national and international network of Shia *tabligh* activities that has arisen since the Iranian Revolution in '79. The Hadi organisation for example sends posters of the Ayatollahs around India for Muharram, also broadcasting a TV channel with programs on Shia history and education (Ahmed). Sahar TV, a branch

of Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, also airs cultural, religious and political programs across Pakistan and India (Wallayad). These two examples (of many) reflect how development of new information technologies (and increasing local access to them) has been thoroughly utilised for *tabligh*, with one Chiktan resident directly attributing the increased religiosity of residents to the accessibility of easily understandable religious teaching over the internet (Ali). More conventional print media has also been employed; a Shakh in Chiktan explained how the teachings on food – based on the idea that drinking of alcohol and eating of meat not specifically killed for the purpose results in pollution in non-Muslims transferrable through cooking – were not his own perspective, but something he taught from religious books approved by the Ayatollah and sent from Iran (Shakh A). These books, with teachings on everything from correct methods of prayer and wearing the hijab to practices at Muharram and funerals, are reportedly disseminated around the world free of charge, and cost 10-20 INR in India with tax.

### *Islamisation vs. Iranisation*

The increasingly active dissemination of religious ideology abroad and financial support for Shakhs to study in Tehran reflects Iran's attempt to position itself as a global leader of Shia Islam since the revolution. Through various theological and political theories Ayatollah Khomeini laid claim to the position of absolute religious authority in the Muslim world, with Shakhs in Kargil describing how, as the religious head of all Shia and Sunni (something most Sunni would presumably take issue with), it is imperative for all other Ayatollahs and religious leaders to follow the Supreme Leader's teachings (Shakh B). Similarly, Ayatollah Khomeini espoused a vision of a 'global, transnational' Muslim *Ummah* united by 'Islamic politics' that has been propagated, along with religious teaching, through the channels described above (Pinault 293; "Imam" 6). The influence of this ideology is visible all over Kargil town, where everything from shops to parks are named after Iran's Supreme Leaders and their faces are as omnipresent as that of the Dalai Lama in Tibetan communities. This external religious vision has placed new pressures upon the conception of a common Ladakhi identity and culture. The global, politicised Shia identity central to Ayatollah Khomeini's vision for a united Muslim *Ummah* conflicts directly with Ladakh's tradition of non-politicised religious identity that allowed Buddhists and Muslims to coexist harmoniously under various political dynasties of each religion. The resulting conflation of religious, political and cultural identity, presents a similar challenge to the idea of a common Ladakhi identity and culture. A Kargil journalist characterised the issue as that of Islamisation and Iranisation, in which people fail to distinguish between following religious teachings and adopting cultural exports from Iran at the expense of Ladakhi cultural heritage. In light of the changes visible in Chiktan and Kuksho, interaction between religious teaching

and cultural heritage is especially significant, specifically the question of whether the two can coexist in the same environment.

Shakhs in Kargil argued that there was no conflict between the two; that the Prophet Mohammed never argued for the changing of culture, which depends on the characteristics of each specific area. And yet this argument presupposes that religious practise and culture can somehow be separated, as if they are distinct aspects of social life. On the contrary, it is evident from the changes described above that the arrival of 'orthodox' teaching from outside Ladakh has eliminated many traditional cultural practices from Muslim communities in Kargil. Senior residents of Kargil town argued that many aspects of the Purig region's rich and unique culture were being lost with conversion to Islam, while being preserved along with Buddhism in Leh. Elders in Chiktan and Kuksho similarly described how they were no longer supposed to sing traditional folk songs, with a grandfather in Kuksho saying that he had forgotten how to sing the Epic of Gesar since following Islamic teaching on singing and music (Bir). These folk songs, which in a generation may be extinct among Muslim communities in Kargil, reflect many aspects of Ladakhi culture previously common to Buddhists and Muslims, from trade expeditions in Changthang to the story of Gesar, a figure of legendary significance in the Purig region, to which he is supposed to have travelled from Tibet. Their disappearance presents a perfect metaphor for how religious teaching is undermining a common Ladakhi cultural identity at the expense of greater links between Kargil and the Middle East.

Nor is this challenge to a common identity limited to traditional practices and folk songs, but is visible in everything from architecture to language. The mosques of today's Ladakh are universally built in an instantly distinguishable Turko-Iranian style, but as Sheikh observes, this was not always the case (Sheikh, "*Reflections*" 88). The *Jamia Masjid* in Leh, for example, was constructed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in traditional Ladakhi architectural style, before being renovated in the 1980's (Sheikh 92; Mustafa). And just as Ladakhi Muslims now utilise foreign architectural styles for their religious buildings over local ones, so too do they utilise a foreign script. The Tibetan script with which Ladakhi or Purgi is accurately represented is no longer taught in Kargil district, with people instead using Urdu to imperfectly transcribe their local language. While this can be read as a sign of increasing links with the Persian and Arab world, it is also a result of attempts by Buddhists in Leh to inseparably associate the Tibetan script with Buddhism itself, evident in the very name *Bodi* (as opposed to Purgi or Tibetan). As well as succeeding in suppressing campaigns to promote a contemporary written Ladakhi language, this has encouraged Muslim Ladakhis to abandon the original script of their language under the apprehension that learning *Bodi* would be a betrayal of their religious community (Ali).



Left: The Leh Bazaar in 1938; the old *Jamia Masjid* mosque in traditional Ladakhi style.

Below: A poster for Muharram featuring Ayatollahs Khomeini and Khamenei in Chiktan.



Below: The new *Jamia Masjid* in the torn-up Leh Bazaar. In the background: the Leh Palace, constructed by Chandan Singge Ali.



## The Politics of Communalism

It is clear that external religious and cultural forces are challenging a common Ladakhi identity in Kargil. Political identity is increasingly drawn along religious lines, with communities voting according to religious affiliation and unable to unite behind common issues and candidates (Bir). And while the influence of religious teaching from Iran has played a clear role, it is in fact local Buddhist organisations that have made the greatest use of communal rhetoric for political ends. The most dramatic single event to have influenced the relations between religious communities in the past three decades was the 1989 Social Boycott. Organised and enforced by the Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA), the boycott forbade personal and commercial interaction with Muslims. Shops were marked in Tibetan and Urdu scripts for identification purposes, while those who defied the boycott were fined or beaten, depending on the severity of their offence (Bray, *“Old Religions”* 9). The boycott was closely linked to the demand for political autonomy from the J&K government in the form of Union Territory (UT) status, which in itself reflected a range of religious and communal concerns directly and indirectly linked with the changes analysed above. An employee at the LBA whom I shall call Skarma articulated the issues, which might best be divided into economic discrimination and religious competition.

The first reflected an argument that Buddhists in Ladakh are economically discriminated against by the majority Muslim J&K government, evidenced by the overwhelming majority of Kashmiri shopkeepers in Leh. (In fact, this might better be explained by Kashmiris’ historic presence as traders of handicrafts, their experience in the tourism industry, and the farming occupations of almost all Ladakhis until recent years.) Buddhists, he argued, were also underrepresented in government and received disproportionately few government jobs. This economic pressure was not attributed solely to the J&K government but also to local social behaviours, specifically Muslims’ refusal to eat Buddhist food, which supposedly extended to patronising Buddhist shops. On account of this, Skarma argued, it was only natural for Buddhists to support their own shops; in fact, the entire thing had been exaggerated and framed as a boycott by the Muslim-controlled media.

The second issue, religious competition, similarly portrayed Buddhists as under attack. Describing Ladakh as culturally Buddhist – ‘totally different’ from Hindu Jammu and Muslim Kashmir – he described how Buddhists in Ladakh were on the ‘verge of extinction’ with people converting to Islam. Observing that the whole area had been Buddhist before the spread of Islam through Afghanistan, he accused Muslim missionaries of targeting remote areas and ‘luring’ locals to convert with promises of money and jobs. ‘Muslims can marry seven wives’, we were told, something sure to tempt potential converts, and all this was supported by the J&K government. Muslims were also

‘taught or brainwashed’ to have four or five children, as part of a long term strategy to ‘outnumber us and take our lands’; indeed the Muslim birth rate in Ladakh far outnumbered the Buddhist. While the LBA’s communalist agenda was at times painfully transparent, such as the claim that only members of the Buddhist community died in the 1999 Kargil War, the concerns that Skarma articulated are not isolated to this Buddhist-nationalist organisation.

### *Root Causes*

Frustrations about Muslim eating habits and fears that ‘Buddhists are under threat of extinction in whole of the Himalayan belt’ are clearly impossible to separate from the current and historic influence of external religious forces from the Middle East (Skarma). Part of wider fears about traditional Buddhist values in the region, Bray compares the situation to the ‘double minority syndrome’ in Sri Lanka, arguing that while Buddhists constitute a slim majority in the region, the situation in surrounding ‘Chinese-occupied Tibet, Pakistani-occupied Baltistan and insurgent-infested Kashmir’ naturally cultivates a sense of vulnerability (10). This sense of vulnerability, based in part upon the history of conversion in the region, has played into the LBA’s communalising agenda, and manifested in a Buddhist pronatalist movement (endorsed by the LBA and obliquely inferred by Skarma) which pits the idea of ‘the ‘hyper-fertile Muslim woman’ against the ‘vulnerable Buddhist’ (Aengst 1). This is in spite of the fact that the ‘Buddhist population is currently growing faster’ than the Muslim population in Ladakh, although as Aengst observes this may in fact be a result of ‘Buddhist pronatalism and anti-family planning activism’ in the 90’s (25).

Other factors behind this sense of vulnerability are more economic in nature, but also play in to the LBA’s rhetoric of communalism. The continued dominance of Kashmiri shopkeepers even after the granting of Hill Development Council status in 1995 suggests that the LBA’s claims about an organised anti-Buddhist conspiracy might, astonishingly, have been wide of the mark. But the perception of discrimination against Ladakh by the J&K government remains widespread today, and exists amongst Ladakhi Muslims as well as Buddhists (Sheikh interview). Ironically, by ‘instrumentalising religion’ for political ends, the LBA has discouraged the Muslim community from supporting the UT cause, while the division of Kargil and Leh into separate, semi-autonomous hill councils has only furthered the drawing of political identity along religious lines (Sheikh int.; Bray 9-10). But the economic angle of the LBA’s rhetoric reveals a wider malaise about development in Ladakh and its attempted move from an agricultural to a command economy that is visible in both Muslim and Buddhist communities.

The arrival of the Indian army and government jobs, development of infrastructure, and improvements in education since Ladakh became part of India has resulted in a dramatic shift away from traditional agricultural and nomadic lifestyles, with more and more people choosing to seek out more diverse forms of employment in Leh, Kargil and beyond. The shift away from the local, mirroring the religious and cultural tendencies above, has resulted in dramatic social change over recent decades. As well more tangible changes, like the transition from local sustainability to reliance on imports, villagers in Chiktan and Kuksho reported an increasingly materialistic focus on distribution of wealth at the expense of social relations. Ironically, while Kuksho villagers described the wealth gap between richest and poorest as smaller today than it ever had been, they suggested economic competition among villagers had in fact increased, along with a decrease in general levels of contentment and happiness (Bir). Far from being the nostalgic reminiscences of senior villagers, these social changes are manifesting in tangible ways, from the increasingly expensive gifts offered during *Bakston* ceremonies (a problem for poorer families) to a phone dropped in the village, which once would have been returned and now was gone for good (Puntsok). ‘Perceived regional imbalances, lack of access to employment, and slow implementation of “development” plans, coupled with the persistent erosion of relative local self-sufficiency’ have clearly impacted social relations at a local level, with increased competition for economic resources (Van Beek 28). It was in this context that the LBA’s appeal to economic discrimination was so effective, as they successfully communalised frustrations about Ladakh’s slow development along local religious lines.

These concerns and their root causes are alive and well in Ladakh today, with the J&K High Court’s recent annulment of Ladakh’s special ‘promotion and reservation rights of Schedule Caste / Schedule Tribe community’ and the subsequent protests in Kargil and Leh a clear indication of the continued perception of state mismanagement (“Kargil”). The LBA no longer carries out ‘street politics’, instead focusing on education, and yet between the combative language it employs – ‘education is the only weapon we have’; ‘the Buddhist population of Ladakh is plagued and marginalised’ – and the vision of political Islam being imported by Iran, the unification of Buddhist and Muslim communities for pan-Ladakhi issues looks increasingly rare (Skarma). Tellingly, there was no united opposition to the High Court’s reservation annulment decision. Events like the social boycott have predictably driven the communities further apart than ever – the disappearance of intermarriage between Muslims and Buddhists is often attributed to the events of ’89 – while the ‘communal idiom of Indian politics’, a clear inspiration for the LBA’s ‘sectarian approach’, is arguably more pronounced than ever with the BJP’s rise to political power (Mustafa; Sheikh lecture; Bray 10). Indeed, it is worth asking exactly what effect being thrust into the world’s largest democracy has had upon local communities in Ladakh, with one Kargil senior suggesting that the current system of three



tiers of elections in Ladakh (for one Ladakhi MP in Delhi, 4 MLAs in J&K and 2 MLCs each for Leh and Kargil's Hill Councils) has led to increasing polarisation of local communities by the proliferating number of candidates, often along communal religious lines. Interestingly, he described the (less 'democratic') system immediately after independence, when a *Goba* in each village (appointed by consensus rather than election) had worked with a regional development officer in Kargil town, as the most harmonious and least divisive. Van Beek goes so far as to directly attribute Ladakhi communalism to the influence of Indian politics, suggesting that local politicians have 'adapted to what they perceived to be the rules of the game', employing communalist tactics to achieve their agendas (24).

## Local Harmony in a Globalised World

Despite the challenges discussed in this paper, Buddhists and Muslims in Ladakh still enjoy a relatively peaceful state of coexistence; communal conflict has been 'the exception rather than the rule ... in past decades' (Van Beek 23). A half millennium history of shared lifestyles, language, tradition and culture is not easily washed away. Kuksho village, although now separated into clearly distinguished religious communities, continues to provide a unique example of religious coexistence. Conflict is unheard of, government funds are shared evenly by all and both communities contribute to the construction of each other's religious buildings (Shakh C). The village has one *Goba*, one school in which children of both communities are educated together (an increasingly uncommon phenomenon around Ladakh) and both communities attend the weddings and funerals of the other. Even in Chiktan, when the grandfather of the one remaining Buddhist family passed away, the whole community bore him on their shoulders to the funeral pyre in traditional Buddhist style (Hussein). Similarly, during the Bodkharbu riot of 2006, the same Buddhist family in Chiktan were unscathed, a testament to the power of local community (Hussein).

And yet the very occurrence of the Bodkharbu riot – in which the discovery of a torn Qur'an during Muharram led Muslims from the surrounding area (including Chiktan) to bus in to the town and stone the houses of Buddhists, injuring twelve – along with the '89 Social Boycott shows that the pressures explored in this paper are having an effect (Rigzin). For, between the influence of global religious forces, the challenges of development, and the increasingly communal tone of national and local politics, it would be naïve to imagine a return to the harmony of the past. It is impossible to separate these pressures, for at a basic level they all stem from Ladakh's increasing connections to an increasingly globalised world. Indeed, when the author was asked by a Kuksho resident how the surrounding mountain roads, often rendered impassable in winter, might be improved, I could not help but think that the difficulty of traversing those very roads might be the reason behind Kuksho's continued social harmony. (After several glasses of military pension supplied rum, he clearly gauged me qualified to comment insightfully on the subject.) These globalised forces are depriving Muslim and Buddhist Ladakhis of the foundations of their common identity, for what makes a community if not shared language, shared festivals and traditions, or the very act of sharing food together? Shakhs in Chiktan spoke repeatedly of the importance of respecting the religions of others and not considering one's own religion superior as the foundation of social harmony. This is an admirable ideal, and yet not only does it directly contradict the missionary tradition that introduced Islam to the area, but it ignores the fact that people increasingly lacking common beliefs and lifestyles begin to perceive fundamental differences between the self and other. The description made by a Kargili Buddhist that Muslims believe in suffering in this life to avoid hell in the next, in contrast to

Buddhists' approach to life, demonstrated this perceived difference in an attempt to rationalise the increasing lack of common traditions like dancing, singing and drinking (Api). Teaching against shaking hands with a non-Muslim who has just washed his hands, or the use of non-Muslims lifestyle habits as examples of immoral behaviour – both reported of the Shakhs by my informants in Chiktan – inevitably create perceptions of the other as inherently different. This, in tandem with increasingly separate residence, education, and the lack of teaching about religion in the school system, means that younger generations of Buddhist and Muslim Ladakhis are more separate (both in reality and perception) than ever before. For, as Van Beek observes, Ladakhis growing up during the '89 agitation have little understanding of 'the complexities of the history of Muslim-Buddhist relations in Ladakh and of the exaggerations and distortions of agitation propaganda on both sides' (29).

This increasing perception of fundamental difference is clearly an ominous direction for Ladakh's tradition of religious coexistence to take, and as globalisation, modernisation, and the influence of new religious forces – Wahhabis now make up a major group in the Dras valley of Kargil – look to continue unabated in the region, the fundamental question is whether Ladakh can forge its own vision of the future or will succumb to the influence of external forces. This paper has focused on religion, but this question pervades everything from the survival of traditional clothes suited to the local climate over Western and Middle Eastern arrivals, to local crops and cuisine over Indian imports. As an employee at the J&K Cultural Academy in Kargil observed, Ladakh's tradition of organic crops and natural medicines are what today's world needs in place of chemical fertilisers and artificial medication. Similarly, in the face of religious extremism and increasing tendencies to conceptualise global conflicts between religions, Ladakh's unique tradition of harmonious religious coexistence needs to be preserved. The alternative, in which Leh and Kargil are pulled in opposite directions while Buddhists and Muslims increasingly lack a common tradition, understanding and lifestyle, means that the few communal conflicts of the past decades are unlikely to be isolated events.

### Final thoughts

During this paper I have tried to steer clear of making judgements about the relative merit or radicalism of different religious ideologies. All of the religious practitioners and teachers I spoke to were deeply kind and welcoming, happy to share their thoughts on religion with me, and respectful of the practices of others. It is very likely that some would read the sections of this paper about changing culture and tradition with a deep sadness for things lost, while others would see in it the happy assertion of a more virtuous way of life. Residents of Kargil universally viewed the increase in Shakhs and clearer religious teaching and practise that has resulted as a good thing. And yet there is a conflict in people's minds between the perceived improvement in religious practise and the observation that people are more materialistic and less supportive of each other than the past. It was a general observation that while people were economically better off, with better decorated houses, they were internally less well developed, less full of love or compassion (Mussa). As Sheikh observed, 'on the one hand people are becoming more knowledgeable about their religions, yet they act worse in everyday life.'

I hope that this paper will encourage people to think about the role of religion and religious practise in their own lives and in life and politics of the community as a whole. Do we espouse the fundamental tenants of those religions, or do we – as claimed by one Kargili journalist – simply want a 'side' to be on? Furthermore, I hope Ladakh's example – in which greater connectivity to external religious centres, political systems and modes of 'development' have forged new divisions and opposing identities – will provide a tool through which to examine the impact of globalisation upon the reality of local religion and community.

## Appendix: Maps of Ladakh

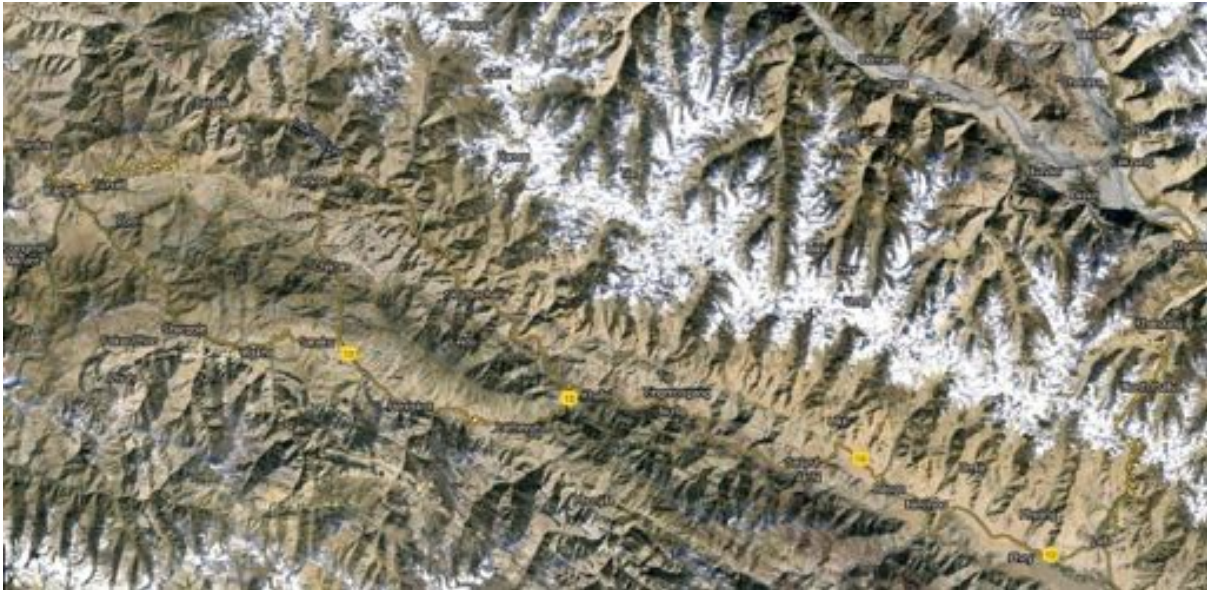


Fig. 1 (Above): Topographic map of central Ladakh, showing Leh town on the lower right, Kargil town in the upper left. Chiktan town (and the unmarked Kuksho village) lies in between the two, in Kargil district.

Fig. 2 (Below): Political map of Jammu and Kashmir.



## Methodology

After the publication of his much quoted work on Kuksho Village, Sheikh followed up with a report on the negative fallout that had resulted, in which he was reportedly threatened with a law suit while villagers were 'warned not to talk with strangers'. Multiple foreign academics similarly warned me that asking about religion as an outsider in Kuksho might prove challenging to say the least. In fact, during my time in the village, residents were welcoming and happy to discuss their lives and practices with me. Locals did not even have a recollection of outsiders causing trouble, save one hapless foreign academic who had accidentally violated the injunction upon women visiting the village *lha* (a *chorten* on the hill).

Although the details of the Kuksho case therefore seem to have undergone some exaggeration in the retelling, I was nevertheless highly aware of the potential sensitivity of my subject matter and its potential ramifications for those kind enough to talk with me. My information was gathered during one and a half months of interviews and observation in Leh and Kargil districts, with one week spent in Chiktan and Kuksho each. Interviews were conducted both within people's houses and at a host of locations around the town/village due to the often unplanned and fortuitous encounters I had with informants. Interviewees were informed of my project, its topic, and asked to provide oral consent for their information and the information they provided to be included in my work, always before the interview commenced. My informants were almost universally happy to have their names included in my work, and I think that being able to freely discuss issues of religion without fear of consequence is incredibly important in today's world. However, despite this, I have decided to change the names of almost all interviewees to protect against any possible future ramifications.

## Limitations

This project sought to analyse a complex situation in a woefully short period of time. As neither a scholar of Buddhism or Islam, and with little to no knowledge of any of the local languages used in Ladakh (Ladakhi, Hindi, Urdu, etc.) my attempts to record certain aspects of the complex cultural and religious practices there may be limited, even contain errors in the interpretation or recording process. Much of the research (everything in Chiktan and Kuksho) was conducted with the help of my research partner in translating from the local dialect to English. His translation was magnificent, however it is possible that certain details were missed or misunderstood in the conversion process.

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## Glossary

Ayatollah	– High ranking religious figure for Shia Muslims
Bakston	– Wedding ceremony
Caravanserai	– Inn with a central courtyard for travellers
Chang	– Tibetan beer brewed from fermented barley
Chodkang	- A Buddhist shrine room (same as Lhakang, sometimes)
Chorten	– Buddhist Stupa
Goba	– Town headman or mayor, generally appointed by consensus every five years
Gonpa	– Buddhist monastery
Gos	– Traditional Ladakhi garment
Haram	– Arabic term meaning forbidden
Imambara	– Congregation hall for Shia commemoration ceremonies, esp. during Muharram
Kandres	– Baggy trousers and long shirt, similar to <i>Shalwar Kameez</i> worn in Pakistan and Afghanistan
Khatak	– Ceremonial scarf (usually white) presented as a blessing in Tibetan cultures
Lha	– Local spirit or deity
Lhakang	– A Buddhist shrine room
Masjid	– Mosque
Maulvi	– Highly qualified Islamic scholar. Especially used by Ladakhi Sunnis
Muharram	– Month in the Islamic calendar in which the death of Hussein is commemorated
Namaz	– Daily prayer
Shakh/Sheikh	– Religious teacher for Shia Muslims
Ulama/Ulema	– Muslim scholar with special knowledge of Islamic law and theology
Ummah	– Global community of Muslims

### Suggestions for further research

Further research could focus on external religious influences in the region other than that of Iran. Saudi Arabia has been increasingly active in funding Wahhabi organisations in India, while the influence of the new Tibetan exile community in India upon Ladakhi Buddhism could provide an interesting new avenue of investigation. Alternatively, political approaches could look at the influence of the BJP's Hindu nationalist rhetoric upon Ladakhi politics, the reasons behind their political success in the region, and how new political movements like the New Ladakh Movement are seeking to create a new, Ladakhi-based approach to the Indian political system. Finally, the ways in which cultural organisations in Kargil (both government and private) are balancing the tension between religious teaching and local traditions could provide a greater insight into the conflicting forces at work in the region.