

Research Article

## Buddhist and Shia Identity in Ladakh

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2218/himalaya.2025.10173>

### Abstract

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There are many ways to define Ladakh: geographically (as an area between the Himalayas and the Karakoram), historically (as a kingdom from the 10th century until the Dogra conquest in 1834), or linguistically (as a region sharing a common language—a Tibetan dialect). However, most of these definitions have been put forward by foreigners or officials. Do the inhabitants of these areas feel that they belong to the same community? The author's answer is "no." He concludes that Shi'as in Kargil and Buddhists in Leh consider themselves to constitute separate communities. The survey draws on sociology, ethnology, and some history, extending back to 1931.

### Keywords

Ladakh, Buddhism, Islam, Purig, Baltistan, Shiism

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### Recommended Citation

Kaplanian, Patrick (2025). Buddhist and Shia Identity in Ladakh. *HIMALAYA* 44(1): 146-163.



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## Introduction

Ladakh lies between the Himalayas and the Karakorum, and its people speak a Tibetan dialect. Before its conquest by the Hindu maharaja of Jammu (1834), it was an independent kingdom. The maharaja then acquired Kashmir, a region with a Muslim majority, from the British, forming the state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). In 1947, part of J&K was conquered by Pakistan, and the remaining part was attached to India.

From 1947 to 1979, Ladakh was a single district; then, from 1979 to 2019, it was divided into two districts, Kargil and Leh. While the majority of Kargilis (or Purigis—their region is also called Purig) are Twelver Shi'as, the district of Leh is dominated by Buddhists of the Tibetan type (Vajrayana or Lamaism). There is also a Sunni minority in both districts; in Leh, they are known as the Argon.

The question considered in this paper is whether Shi'as and Buddhists feel that they belong to a single community. One can take as a reference Renan's famous phrase (1997 [1882]) when he states that nations are formed through the voluntary association of individuals with a common past who "have done great things together and want to do more" ("avoir fait de grandes choses ensemble, vouloir en faire encore"). Do Ladakhi Buddhists and Shi'as want to do things together?

The question is *a priori* a matter for sociology and takes as its model studies such as those of Hobsbawm (1992), Detienne (2010), Anderson (1996)<sup>1</sup>, and especially Thiesse (2001). But it is also a matter of ethnology, as we shall see in relation to the definition of identity through myths of origin and rituals, as well as histories. In attempting to answer the question, I will have to go back to 1931.

## History

In 1931, riots broke out between Hindus and Muslims in Kashmir. A commission headed by Sir B. J. Glancy was charged with finding the causes and remedies (Lamb 1993; Bertelsen 1996: 118). Since the Buddhist

Ladakhis had no organization of their own to represent them before the Glancy Commission, the Kashmir Raj Boddhi Maha Sabha (KRBMS) did so. The KRBMS was a handful of non-Ladakhi modernist Buddhist intellectuals who mainly made demands concerning education (Bertelsen 1996: 119).

In 1933, the Ladakhi Buddhists established their own association, the Ladakh Buddhist Educational Society (LBES). The vice-president was a member of the family of the Leh *kalhon* (*bka'blon*).<sup>2</sup> There was also an executive of the Hemis monastery, the most important one in Ladakh. The LBES once again made demands about education. They were again rejected.

In 1934 Maharaja Hari Singh established a consultative assembly. Two seats were given to the Buddhists of Ladakh. One of them was none other than the "king," heir to the crown, whose ancestors had not reigned since 1834.

After the LBES, the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) was created. The "king" was the president, and the *kalhon* of Leh was the vice president (Bertelsen 1996: 146-147).

In 1947, after the integration of J&K into the Indian Union, the Muslim Kashmiris, the most numerous, became the majority through universal suffrage. They were represented by the National Conference (NC) led by Sheikh Abdullah. The YMBA presented a memorandum in which it expressed its rejection of Kashmir as well as Pakistan. In other words: anything but integration into a Muslim state (Bertelsen 1996: 164). But Nehru, the Indian Prime Minister, had made a deal with Sheikh Abdullah: Kashmir accepted absorption by India in exchange for strong autonomy and the integrity of the Indian part of J&K. If he wanted *pax cashmirica*, Nehru had no choice but to accept the conditions of the Sheikh. And a few tens of thousands of Ladakhis weighed little in this deal. This agreement implied the maintenance of Article 370 of the Constitution negotiated by the maharaja at the time of the attachment of J&K to India, according to which only a resident of J&K could buy land, set up a business, or become a civil servant in the state.



Figure 1: J&K from 1947 until August 5, 2019

In May 1949, a Ladakhi delegation led by Bakula Rinpoche<sup>3</sup> went to Nehru in Delhi with a memorandum that stated, “We are a separate nation by all the tests—race, language, religion, culture—determining nationality” (Bertelsen 1996: 165-166). He added, “The right to self-determination claimed by us cannot be claimed with equal force by the people [of districts] predominantly peopled by Muslims (...).” Clearly, religion took precedence over other criteria.

In 1952, Bakula proposed to separate the Buddhists and the Muslims into two

separate administrative units. And, prophetically, he added, “The past attitude of the Baltis [Ladakhi Shi’as] people, however, renders it quite likely that they may have no desire for internal autonomy, and they may even prefer to be administratively aligned with the adjoining district of Kashmir” (Bertelsen 1996: 177).

In 1967, Bakula won the Ladakh MP<sup>4</sup> seat in the New Delhi parliament. His right-hand man, Sonam Wangyal, won the MLA<sup>5</sup> seat in the Srinagar parliament. The LBA, successor of the YMBA, had become the main

Buddhist association. In 1977, the “queen” became an MP.

In 1979, Leh district was divided to form two districts: Leh and Kargil. Leh was 80 percent Buddhist, and Kargil, the second largest city in Ladakh, was 80 percent Muslim, mainly Shi’a.

In 1980, an *All-Ladakh Action Committee for Declaring Ladakh as a Scheduled Tribe*<sup>6</sup> (LAC) was formed. It was a true pan-Ladakh movement in terms of its composition. There were Buddhists, Sunnis, Shi’as, people from Leh, and Kargilis. During the years 1980-1982, the LAC unceasingly demanded “Scheduled Tribe (ST) Status.”

In 1986-87, a “mini-census” was conducted. For Ladakhis to obtain scheduled tribe status, they must be divided into “tribes.”<sup>7</sup>

The LAC was soon overtaken by the *Ladakh Buddhist Association* (LBA), which created a youth branch, established itself in the villages, and entered the professional unions, such as vehicle owners, travel agents, and hoteliers (van Beek 1996: 303). On 18 July 1989, the LBA held a meeting and passed a resolution. It read “Realizing that Ladakh has always been treated as a colony and Ladakhis as a third-rate citizens of J&K State [sic] 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” (van Beek 1996: 310).

At the same time, a *Ladakh People’s Movement for Union Territory Status* (LPMUT) was formed. At a press conference in Delhi, LPMUT leaders declared that they excluded Sunnis from their movement but welcomed Shi’as, especially from Kargil. The argument was that the Shi’as are true natives, who have been there for centuries, while the Sunnis, the Argons, are outsiders.

On 30 July, a *Kargil Action Committee* was formed. It soon made known its reluctance to accept the LBA’s claims. Clearly, the two

main religious communities were becoming organized, each with its own representative association (van Beek 1996: 312). Again, religion seemed to take precedence over all other criteria.

From August 7, 1989 onwards, constant demonstrations were orchestrated by the LBA. Convoys of trucks, buses, and taxis were attacked. On August 27, the local police (mainly Kashmiri) opened fire, killing three people and injuring 80 others. The next day, Thupstan Chhewang (LBA president) was arrested. Security was taken away from the J&K police and handed over to the central government. The army was put on alert. The LBA called for a strike and civil disobedience. A boycott was imposed on Muslims. It was forbidden for any Buddhist to buy or sell or have any dealings with a Muslim.

On October 8, ST status was finally granted. Thus, the eight “tribes” of Ladakh were declared ST. Sunnis were excluded from this status. Thupstan Chhewang was released. However, the central government announced that UT status was absolutely excluded. The LBA continued to press for Union Territory (UT) status (including the Shi’as of Kargil). On October 27, it organized a huge rally of 10,000 people.

On October 29, negotiations took place between the Center, the State, and the LBA. Instead of UT status, the central government proposed Hill Council (HC) status. This would provide strong autonomy within the framework of J&K, whereas the UT status would have meant reporting to New Delhi. The principle of the HC was agreed upon. In exchange, the LBA consented to lift the boycott. Since the Shi’as in Kargil had refused the hand extended by the Buddhists in Leh, the HC status remained limited to the Leh district.

## The Muslim perspective

Until 1989, the Muslim community around Kargil had hardly manifested itself as such. Before 1989, there were no texts, pamphlets, or similar materials. Nor have there been any groups comparable to the YMBA. Instead, Muslims organized themselves



into foundations (*anjuman*) creating schools, orphanages, and dispensaries. Two are found in Kargil: the *Jamia Ulama Isna Asharia*, better known as the *Islamiya School*, founded in 1953, and the *Imam Khomeini Memorial Trust (IKMT)*, founded in 1989 (Gupta 2014: 380).

In 1989, the Muslim view was expressed in a pamphlet entitled *History repeated in Ladakh*.<sup>8</sup> The text rebuts the accusation that Muslims are carrying out forced conversions. It says that the percentage of Buddhists is decreasing due to polyandry and monasticism and that the hand extended to the Shi'as is intended to divide the Muslims (p. 6). This assertion is followed by a long list of attacks and molestations of Muslims in recent months. In this text, the Muslim community defends itself as such. There is not a single mention of Ladakhis as such, Buddhists and Muslims combined.

The text is followed by a memorandum that begins by presenting Ladakhis as, “a people who profess Islam and Buddhism in equal numeral strength and yet speak the same language in different phonetic forms, share the same cultural roots and lifestyle despite the difference in faith. The text goes on to accuse extremist Buddhists of having “severely damaged the cohesive traditions.”

Then comes a third text entitled *Leh-Kargil and Zaskari<sup>9</sup> Action Committee for Scheduled Tribe*. It is dated October 16, 1989. Here again, the text begins by stating that the two religions were living in harmony and adds, against all evidence, that “the language, the dress and the general life-style of Buddhists and Muslims are identical.” (p. 29). This is followed by a long list of attacks on Muslims in recent years.

As we can see, after the formal concessions regarding the existence of a Ladakhi community across the divide between the two religions, these texts are grievances against the Buddhist community and *pro domo* pleas from the Muslim community.

### Birth of the Hill Council (HC)

At the end of 1991, the boycott had been going on for two years. Negotiations began

between the LBA and the governor. At the end of 1992, the LBA finally lifted the boycott.

The *Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council Act* was finally published on May 9, 1995. This was for the Leh district only, but it was intended that the Kargil district would be able to obtain HC status whenever it wanted (van Beek 1996: 360).<sup>10</sup>

The powers vested in this council were considerable. They included the disposition, reclamation, and distribution of all virgin lands; the drafting of a budget and a development plan; and the promotion of languages and cultures. The council could levy taxes and recruit civil servants, except for those of very high rank and those of the judiciary and the police (van Beek 1999: 440-441). However, the J&K government also had considerable restraining powers. The plan, the budget, and other matters had to be accepted by the state government.

### First comments

Many thoughts come to mind after this first purely chronological overview.

1. The first point is the clear dominance of the nobility and high clergy. After an initial attempt by the neo-Buddhists to take their affairs into their own hands, the representation of the Ladakhis was soon controlled by the high clergy and the nobility. It was the *rinpoche* of Hemis who gave his endorsement to the KRBMS. He was the most important figure in the Buddhist clergy at that time. When the LBES was created, the “king” presided over it, assisted by a member of the family of the *kalhon*.<sup>11</sup> This was then the case with the YMBA, of which the king was the president. When the king was appointed to the J&K assembly, he was succeeded by the *kalhon*.

After the *rinpoche* of Hemis, the king and the *kalhon*, Bakula *rinpoche* became the main political leader of the Buddhist Ladakhis. It was always a *rinpoche* who had the upper hand in Ladakhi politics. Bakula was related to the younger branch of the royal family, that of Matho (Kaplanian 2020a). The last on this list of Ladakhi

leaders is Thupstan Chhewang, president of the LBA and later president of the HC. Chhewang encapsulates the whole high religious and noble hierarchy. He is a *rinpoche*, and the reincarnation of a *rinpoche* from the village of Nyoma. His mother was the sister of Bakula Rinpoche. Moreover, he belongs to the family of the *lhonpo*<sup>12</sup> of Shey, and he married the daughter of the “king”. But, at the same time, he marks the transition to a more modern elite. He was educated first in Benares, then in Delhi, before practicing law in Jammu (Bertelsen 1996: 190).

Thus, traditional mentalities are manifested by the attachment not only to the person of a king who, for many years, has not reigned, but also to a whole hierarchy, including the *kalthon*, *lhonpo*, and *rinpoches*, which is archaic, medieval, and even feudal. The persistence of these mentalities is an aspect that struck most of the ethnologists who started working in Ladakh in the 1970s. Listening to the Ladakhis, one sometimes had the impression that the king still reigned.<sup>13</sup>

2. This traditional society is predominantly Buddhist, and the Buddhist identity constantly resurfaces. Let us look again at the events. When the Glancy Commission asked each religious community to come forward, the KRBMS answered “present” in the name of the Buddhists. The *rinpoche* of Hemis replied on behalf of the Buddhist Ladakhis.

Then came the war with Pakistan. Absorption by Pakistan was the Buddhists’ greatest fear. Close behind was the fear of being in a J&K in which Muslim Kashmiris were in the majority. It was expressed in the YMBA memorandum of 1947, which I have already summarized as follows: “anything but Pakistan or Kashmir.” Then, in 1949, the Bakula Rinpoche delegation said, “We are a separate nation...”

Bakula’s position hardened after the 1969 agitation. In his letter to the PM co-signed by 20 other MPs he wrote, “The local Buddhist population has completely lost faith in the local administration, which is exclusively

composed of Muslim officials who (...) not only connived but encouraged violence and atrocities committed by the local Muslim population against the Buddhists” (van Beek 1996: 229).

## How the Communities Represent Themselves

The various texts, pamphlets, and memoranda published by the religious or political organizations or their leaders are insufficient to fully assess the communities’ views. Only in-depth studies can determine whether the inhabitants of each region feel they belong to the same community. We have such access to such studies, namely, the origin myth of the Buddhist Ladakhis and the thesis of Nicola Grist (1998).

### Origin myth of the Buddhist Ladakhis

The myth (Kaplanian 1981, 1983, and 1991) tells that three Shina<sup>14</sup> came from present-day North Pakistan to hunt. In their hats, they had some barley grains, which they dropped. When they returned the following year, the barley had grown in abundance. Amazed, they decided to settle here. More men came from all over. It was a golden age of abundance. They lived in the company of the *lha*, the minor deities. But soon the situation degenerated. After the golden age came the fall. Men became evil, and the deities left them. Misery and famine followed.

It was then that human civilization developed, accompanied by work and technology. An arrow was shot, and the first irrigation canal was built at the spot where it landed. Spontaneous abundance was over. From now on, the land would have to be worked.

The conversion to Buddhism and the establishment of the social hierarchy were accomplished in two stages. First, a *lhonpo* unified the country under his control. Second, the son of the king of Western Tibet inherited Ladakh and introduced Buddhism and monarchy.

The key points emerging from this myth can be summarized as follows:

1. That, according to the Buddhist perspective, Ladakhi identity is the result of a fusion between two peoples: those who came from northern Pakistan and the Tibetans who brought Buddhism and kingship. Ladakhi Buddhists do not consider their country to be a simple extension of Tibet.
2. That Buddhism is inseparable from the monarchy and both are inseparable from the Ladakhi identity.

### ***Grist's study of the Suru Valley and Kargil***

Thanks to the work of Grist (1998), we can now examine the Shi'a viewpoint. Grist's study mainly covers the Suru Valley, home to 25 percent of the population of Kargil district. She also made incursions into the "city" of Kargil, about which she gives us quite a bit of information.

The tone is set from the beginning: the Muslims of Kargil and the Suru define themselves as being in "*contradistinction*" with other peoples of the region, especially the Buddhists (p. 54). Grist notes that the main question a foreigner is asked is, "Do you burn or bury your dead?" which means, "Are you Buddhist or Muslim?"

The conclusion is very clear: "Kargili Muslims see themselves as forming a community that is separate even from Muslims from other areas" (p. 267). The Kargil Muslims have no sense of community with the Buddhists of Leh and even consider the Muslims of the latter region and the Kashmiris as outsiders. On the other hand, the Sunnis and Shi'as in Kargil seem to form a close community. We shall see that this was indeed the case until recently.

How can the Kargili identity be defined? And how can its evolution be gauged? Grist gives us three criteria: a) history as told by the informants themselves, and culture b) social organization c) language, or rather languages, of which I will speak a little later.

### ***History and culture***

It is clear that most Kargilis (Purigis) consider that they were Buddhists at one time before converting to Islam (p. 54, cf. also Sagaster, 1989: 21). Today, all traditions, epics, music, and songs, are rejected. This rejection of the Buddhist past and the mythology linked to it is recent.<sup>15</sup> According to the clerics, these traditions are non-Muslim customs and therefore sins (*nyespa; nyes pa*) (p. 100)<sup>16</sup>. This has resulted in the disappearance of professional musicians (p. 100, and Rizvi 1981: 228). Writing fifteen years later, Gupta confirms that music and dance are *haram* (forbidden). And she adds, "activists lament, for instance, the loss of a repertoire of Purigi folk songs" (2013: 46).

### ***Social (and kinship) organization of the Shi'as***

In Suru, the most important social units are the village, the neighborhood (*khör* or *mohalla*) (p. 58), the *pa*, and the *phaspun* (*pha spun*). The importance of the village and the neighborhood is now well understood (Grist 1976-77 & 1979 and Kaplanian 1981). The *phaspun* of the Shi'as closely resembles the *khangpa* of the Buddhists, the undivided household in which three generations usually live. And the *pa* of the Shi'as is very similar to the *phaspun* of the Buddhists, i.e., a clan, united in certain circumstances. But a new institution appeared around the 1950s: the faction (p. 77). Each faction is headed by *sayyid* (descendants of the prophet) who bear the title of *rehbar*. The main *rehbar* lineages seem to have arrived from Kashmir during the twentieth century (p. 101). The ancestry of the *rehbars* who lead a faction is carefully recorded in notebooks. Thus, the *rehbars* of the Yokmapa faction claim descent from the Prophet via the eighth Shi'a Imam. They claim to have arrived in the Suru Valley eight generations ago (p. 101).<sup>17</sup>

The point here is that the faction has become the most important institution (p. 268). Not that the other institutions have disappeared; "a sense of history seems to have been relocated from the *pa* to the

faction, and consequently the *pa* has ceased to be of any importance.”

However, it can be argued that the rest of the Shi’a population at least recognizes the fact of their Buddhist ancestry. The *sayyid*, descendants of the prophet from the Middle East, are therefore foreigners? “Yes” and “no.” Primarily “no”. We know how traditions can “cheat” with history, even if it is mythical. As Grist writes, “The faction is the main kinship group for its members now, and it also acts as their lineage and history. Through their ties to the *rehbars*, the faction members share their lineage back to the Prophet” (p. 268). “The leader of the faction is descended from the Prophet, and since we are part of this faction, it is kind of like we are descended from the Prophet; at least we are related to him enough to identify with that ancestry.” (page 268).

Thus, not only do the *rehbar* carefully keep a record of the genealogy that traces them back to the Prophet, but it is read on some occasions: “The history of the line of Imams and their sufferings has become the history of faction members and of Suru to some extent” (p. 268). History has been rewritten.

It is now easy to understand why the Shi’as of Kargil finally refused the alliance with the LBA. In every respect, they see themselves as completely different from the Buddhists of Leh. The argument presented by the LBA (Shi’as are indigenous converts to Islam, unlike the Sunnis who came from elsewhere) might have been convincing at the time when Shi’as accepted their earlier Buddhist origin, were not divided into factions, and sang traditional Ladakhi songs at weddings. Then Ladakh’s Buddhist and Shi’a ensemble had something of the appearance of a modern nation, with different religions but a common culture.

It is also likely that the LBA knew this. It was a matter of making a “national” argument because anything “communal” and, in particular, religious, was very much frowned upon. (See the linguistic argument of the Sikhs below).

### *Sunnis of Suru valley*

The Sunnis of the Suru Valley consider themselves to be related to each other through a common semi-mythical ancestor, who is believed to have come from Kashmir. Indeed, most Sunnis seem to be of outside origin on the paternal side (Grist 1998: 138), the only side that counts for a patrilineal society.

For the moment, let us note that the Sunnis, unlike the Shi’as (except for the descendants of the prophet, of course), consider themselves to be of outside origin. Around 1980, that was the end of the matter. Sunnis and Shi’as were not distinguishable from each other and often intermarried (Grist 1998: p. 138). “They [Sunnis] were also virtually indistinguishable from Shi’as in terms of dress, language, and day-to-day activities (...). They also used to attend Shi’a religious observances such as *Muharram*.<sup>18</sup> Besides, they were all poor, and, from this point of view too, there were no notable differences” (page 138).

The situation changed with the introduction of positions in the civil service or with the development of infrastructure. In the Suru block alone, in the 1930s, the literacy rate was low, and those few adults who were literate used Arabic and/or Persian (p. 143). When schools began to be built, only, or almost only, the Sunnis took advantage of them. And when job opportunities arose, only Sunnis took advantage of them.

In the 1970s, Grist explains, the Yogmapa faction was mostly interested in a millenarian movement. A “hidden imam,” it was said, would return repeatedly. The Yokmapas showed little interest in secular education or the expanding state economy until the 1980s. Shi’as realized what was happening—or rather what had happened—too late because most of the jobs to be created had already been created. Why the Sunni success? Grist gives several reasons:

- 1) Shia’s have a stronger ideological connection to the land than Sunnis do (pp. 135-136).



- 2) Sunnis have less land, so demographic pressure has led them to earn their livelihood using means other than agriculture.
- 3) The Sunnis quickly took up Urdu. This brought them closer to the Kashmiris and opened the doors to an administration built on Urdu. It seems that the Shi'as, more attached to Arabic and Persian, had a different approach to education.

The difference between the models promoted by the two branches of Islam is considerable. For Sunnis, there is nothing wrong with finding “secular” jobs. For Shi'as, it is the acquisition of merits through religious education (meaning Arabic and Persian), reading texts, making donations, making pilgrimages to holy places, and studying religious topics in the Middle East, that is important. If financial resources are limited, then the madrassa will suffice.

In 1993, all the boys and most of the girls in the district were attending school. Unfortunately for the Shi'as, it was too late. The Sunnis had established themselves as the administrative elite, had taken over all the posts, and had locked up the system through cronyism, nepotism, and corruption (p. 153).

We can now understand why, on this precise point of access to administrative posts, and on this precise point only, the Shi'as of Kargil and the Buddhists of Leh found each other. With the status of ST, they were given priority in access to administrative jobs. It is also clear why the Sunnis were excluded. It is likely that the Sunnis were not eliminated from the ST status because of a mistake or clumsiness on the part of the “experts.” It was because they were a micro-minority in the two districts and had acquired a dominant position that justified not granting them ST status, especially since their dominance provoked the fury of the two majority communities.

Thus, the following points begin to become clear:

- That Ladakh does not constitute a cultural unit. Their common history, the element that could have united the Buddhist and Shi'a populations of the two districts, is rendered ineffective because of a radically opposed reading of it by the two communities.
- That a rapprochement could be made with a precise aim, which was for both Buddhists and Shi'as to have their share of the administrative and governmental cake. However, the circumstantial nature of such a rapprochement meant that it could not lead to a lasting alliance, much less a merger.

## There is no Ladakhi identity

### *Popular culture*

In her commentary on van Beek's article (2003) Dollfus writes, “Every year, since the creation of the Leh Cultural Academy in 1969, native scholars have published several volumes of folksongs, folktales, local history, and customs to preserve what they themselves call Ladakhi culture. But those publications do not have a wide audience. In fact, for various reasons (spelling difficulties, lack of clear guidelines in schools, usefulness in Indian administration and daily practices, etc.) a large proportion of Ladakhis—both Buddhist and Muslims—can read or write Urdu or English, but are illiterate in their own language.” (p. 305). In fact, on the Kargili side, this is hardly surprising, since we have seen that the clerics reject epics, music, and songs.

This is fundamental. Modern nations have built their identity on songs, tales, epics, and the establishment of a national language. Thiesse (2001) is a valuable reference in this respect, providing information on Dalmatian songs (p. 43), Herder's *Volkslieder* (German songs) (p. 43), as well as the Serbian (p. 84), Greek (p. 87), and Bulgarian (p. 101) folk songs. Nations can also rely on fairy tales such as the Romanian tales (p. 16) and epics such as *Die Nibelungen* (p. 32) or

those published by the Brothers Grimm (*The Heroic Legend, German Mythology*: 66). When no folk tales can be found, or there are not enough, false epics are created, such as Ossian's *Fingal* (p. 25), the songs of Igor's troop (p. 44), and the Czech epics (p. 106). The same is true for songs: the *Guzla*, a collection of Serbian folk songs published in 1827, was actually written by Mérimée. However, for Ladakh, it is unnecessary to produce forgeries—all the elements: songs, epics (the epic of Kesar), and tales are there. Moreover, much of this material had already been published by Moravian missionaries.

### **Language**

It remains to look at the language. In some European countries, it was necessary to forge a new language based on dialects. This was the case with Norwegian (Thiesse 2001: 73-75), Albanian (p. 112), and Estonian (p. 118). It was sometimes difficult to achieve this because of a lack of inter-comprehension between the dialects (for example, in Albania). In other cases, it was necessary to create a modern language from an old written language—the most obvious example is Hebrew (pp. 76-80)—or adapt a written language as in Germany and Italy (pp. 71-72). In Ladakh, there would have been no difficulty with the dialects; Leh and Kargil speakers understand one another.

*Language according to the Buddhists:* In a fascinating article (Bray and al. 2020) four authors describe the release of textbooks for Ladakh in classical Tibetan. The project was a failure. Ladakhi people still do not know classical Tibetan and are much better at Urdu.

The underlying model is that of Germany and Italy before reunification, or the Arab model today, i.e., separate states speaking to each other in different dialects that are not written and having a written language that is common even though it is mastered only by a minority.

This model could not work. Why not? Ladakhis are not Tibetans, as they state repeatedly. They admit their religion is the

same as Tibet's, but the original myth presents the Ladakhi civilization as the result of syncretism between Shina and Tibetan cultures.<sup>19</sup>

*Language according to the Muslims:* The Purigi have never learned a single word of classical Tibetan. They consider classical Tibetan to be the language of Buddhism. What they rely on is Arabic, the language of the Koran, and Persian. The main *rehbars* studied in the major centers of Iraq and Iran. (Grist 1998: 26). Thus, of the two leaders of the Yogmapa faction, Agha Miggi Ort and Agha Bagir, the latter is much less influential: "He has not studied in Iran or Iraq" (ibid.: 78). Thus, the social hierarchy is largely based on knowledge of Arabic and Persian. It is the second criterion after the genealogy going back to the Prophet. Since then, with the opening of modern schools, Urdu and English have become increasingly important.

Zeisler summarized the situation well: "Like any minor language, the Ladakhi language, or *ladakse skat* and its dialects, spoken by about 180,000 speakers in Ladakh, is under strong pressure from the official state language (in this case, Urdu), the language of higher education (English), and the languages of mass media (Hindi and Urdu)." (Zeisler 2006: 2). "For many scholars, *phal-skak* [spoken Ladakhi] is but a deviation or even 'rubbish,' not worthy of being preserved, not to speak of being developed" (ibid.: 4). This is not exactly true. Kargilis recite religious hymns like *marsiya*s (elegies composed to recall the events at Karbala), *nahas* (dirges recited during *Muharram*), and *qasidas* (odes to the Prophet and Shi'i imams) written in Purigi dialect (Gupta 2012a). All this is obviously linked to religion, but poets are also important, and I will discuss them at the end of this article.

### **Lack of Ladakhi collective awareness**

Some snippets of the ancient pre-Islamic culture can still be found. In Muslim law, there is a concept known as '*urf*'. '*Urf*' is a tolerance of local customs provided they do not contradict Islamic law. Thus, Gupta writes, "I had heard from other intellectuals

in Kargil that *Mamani* is held during the coldest period of the winter between 21st December and 21st January, known as *Chile Kalan*; special food is cooked (usually a goat is slaughtered) and shared with relatives and friends. These feasts are held to mark the peaceful passage of winter. This festival was cited to me by several people in Kargil as an example of ‘regional cultural’ or a remnant of Kargil’s Buddhist past” (Gupta 2013: 47).

For her part, Grist mentions that those who fetch the bride and bring her back during the wedding ceremony, the *nyopa* (*gnya’bo pa*), are accompanied by the maternal uncle, the *azhang* (*a zhang*) (Grist 1998: 205, 225, and Gupta 2022b). The procedure is the same as for Buddhist weddings

#### ***A religion-based identity***

If it is not a nation based on language, what is it? Are we talking about two nations, each with a religious basis? Such nations exist. We even have an example in India. On November 1, 1966, the Akali Dal, the main Sikh party, obtained the creation of a Punjabi state after almost 20 years of struggle. The demand was made on a linguistic basis: the creation of a state for the speakers of the Punjabi language. But no one was fooled: the Akali Dal is a Sikh party, and what it was demanding was a Sikh state, which it finally got.

It is helpful to examine the case of Yugoslavia, which existed as a country from 1918 to 1992. Serbs, Croats, and Bosnians spoke the same language, and religion was the only difference. The Croats were Catholic, the Serbs Orthodox, and the Bosnians Muslim. Only the script differed: the Croats wrote in Latin characters, and the Serbs in Cyrillic characters (cf. Urdu and Hindi). The Bosnians, on the other hand, had used Arabic characters until 1878, when the Austrians, who had replaced the Ottomans, put an end to this practice. (To-day they use both Latin and Cyrillic characters). The division of Yugoslavia into three main states between 1990 and 1992 is all the more astonishing given that there were all the ingredients for creating

a linguistically based nation.<sup>20</sup> Just as in Finland and Estonia, dialects had given rise to a common language, and collections of epics, stories, and songs had been published. Despite everything, religion reappeared. The Titist regime, not known for being religion-friendly, nevertheless granted Bosnian Muslims the status of a nation. To avoid confusion between Bosnian Muslims and Muslims, it was decided to spell the former with a capital M and the latter with a lowercase m. In 1974, the Yugoslav Constitution recognized these “Muslims” as the sixth constituent nation of the Federation (Glamocak 2007: 41; Garde 2007: 51-60). Later these “Muslims” adopted the term Bosnian. But, make no mistake, the words Croat, Serb, and Bosnian, serve to cloak a religious identity in a national identity.

In the case of Ladakh, can we specify what this religious identity is? It is not a question of theology. I doubt that many Buddhists know the Sarnath Sermon, or that many Muslims know what the *ijmā’* or the *hisba* is. No, it is something more practical that emerges, as this quote from Aggarwal) makes clear:

My occupancy in both sides of Achinathang became a venue through which the intense competition between the Muslim and Buddhist communities was addressed. How did I cope, I was asked by people in Gongmathang, in the “land of the *phyi-pa*<sup>21</sup>?” Did I cover my face and hair behind a veil, did I eat fish as they did, did I see them prepare for a hunt, did they eat in the same plate as me and accept my food, was I treated as well? How had I existed, the Muslims asked, with those who drank beer all day, who slept with the wives of their brothers, who ate unhealthy meat after the animal had died if they ate any at all, who would not accept food from the hands of the castes they called lower? Food and marriage motifs recurrently emerged as points of difference. (...)

Nonetheless, if one looks only for disparity, the evidence is considerable.

There are noticeable differences in the orientation and décor of houses between Yogmathang and the rest of the village. The houses of the Muslims are seldom whitewashed (*dkar-rtsi*), the windows seldom ensconced in carved wooden frames (*shing-tsag*). No prayer flags (*dar-phyogs*) adorn their terraces. The rows and rows of barley growing fields are significantly less in Yogmathang because the cultivation of edible grass to feed livestock is a greater necessity here, etc. (1994: 256-257).

This ties in with the “do you burn or bury your dead?” mentioned by Grist. Identity is a ritual identity. It is manifested in a whole series of customs, especially rites of passage. This ritual identity is coupled with an origin myth that is clearly rooted in Buddhism, and is in the process of formation among Shi’as.

## Recent events

### *The events of August 5, 2019*

On August 5, 2019, Amit Shah, Minister of Interior, presented a text on the reorganization of J&K to both houses of parliament. The reorganization would split Jammu + Kashmir from Ladakh (Kargil + Leh) and make each of these two parts Union Territories (UT). This was the first time an Indian state had been stripped of its statehood.

Fearing the reaction of the Kashmiris, more than 90 percent of whom were Muslim, the government took preventive measures. All telecommunications were cut off, and 4,000 people were arrested or put under house arrest, including three former CMs<sup>22</sup> of J&K.

In Ladakh, the contrast between the reactions in Kargil and Leh was stark. While joy broke out in Leh, in Kargil there was consternation. “Status divides Leh and Kargil. Jubilation in one, howls of protest in other,” observed *The Hindu* (August 7); and on August 31, the same newspaper wrote: “Celebrations in Leh, concerns in Kargil. And the *Times of India* wrote on

August 22, “There was dancing in Leh, while there were protests in Kargil.” *The Hindu* of August 31, 2019, summarized the situation well: “The two markets [Leh and Kargil] seem like they are located at two ends of the country.” The disconnection was total. Gupta made the same observation: “While Ladakhi Buddhists celebrated the UT declaration, the Muslims of Kargil vociferously and unanimously rejected it” (2022: 195). She also talks about the war and the demonstrations and writes that the Kargilis “clearly expressed their allegiance to Kashmir” (2022: 195).

On August 5, demonstrations broke out in Kargil. A big meeting was organized during which it was decided to create a “*Joint Action Committee*” (JAC). It seemed that the rejection of the government decision was unanimous. The Kargili wanted to stay with Kashmir. The JAC called for a strike, signed by the presidents of the two *anjumans*. The strike lasted until August 20.

### After August 5, 2019

Since September 2019, anxiety was rising in Leh. The inhabitants realized that from now on any Indian from the plains could come and settle in Ladakh, buy land, and get a job. For this purpose, an “*Apex Body of Peoples Movement for Sixth Schedule for Ladakh*” was created. The idea was to replace the HC status with the ADC (Autonomous Development Council) status provided for in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. This status implies greater autonomy than HC status. It was designed for the tribes of the Far East (Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Mizoram).

It should be noted that the Kargilis refuse this Sixth Schedule. Asghar Ali Karbalai, former president of the Kargil HC and former MLA, said, “We are not with the UT. We do not support the extension of the Sixth Schedule.” Meanwhile, the president of the IKMT said, “We have decided neither to oppose nor welcome the promise made on the Sixth Schedule (...) We have already suffered due to the UT status, which was not Kargil’s demand.” This is a strange rejection because the problem has nothing



to do with religion. Don't the Kargilis also have an interest in protecting their land and jobs? It is too early to draw any conclusions from this. Let us remember that it took the Kargilis eight years to accept the status of HC. What remains certain is that the disconnect between Leh and Kargil is total.

Since then, the debate in Leh about the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution has continued. Some people, like Phuntsok Stobdan, the only Ladakhi to have attained the rank of ambassador, are skeptical. While recognizing the need to protect local property and jobs, they consider the Sixth Schedule inappropriate for Ladakh, as it is designed for less economically developed societies. Others point out that the HC and UT statutes do not work well together.

In October 2020, the BJP won the Leh HC elections with fifteen out of twenty-six seats, nine going to the Congress and two to independents. This is the first election since the imposition of UT status. Is this a "thank you" to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party?<sup>23</sup> The BJP is a Hindu party, and it is feasible that Buddhists feel closer to Hindus than to Muslims.

For their part, the Muslims of Kargil are sticking to their guns: "Union Territory status was never our demand—it was Leh's demand," explained Sheikh Nazir Ul Mehdi Mohammadi, President, Islamia School, one of the two influential religious schools in Kargil. We had demanded divisional status within the state, which was accorded to us before the abrogation of Article 370. We are no way going to accept the division of Jammu and Kashmir and loss of its special status. When we didn't demand a UT, how are we supposed to support or oppose the demand for Sixth Schedule? Neither we are in its favor, nor in its opposition".

Now that Ladakh has achieved UT status, Kargil feels marginalized from Leh. Mohammadi continues, "All the top offices of the Union Territory administration are in Leh. (...). There were other grievances: Leh had an airport, but Kargil did not. (...) Everyone knows that the road to Kargil is dangerous, and it remains cut off from

the world for six months in winter. (...) We have been always ignored. Nobody from the Center is interested in coming here. They just come to Leh and leave from there. There's definitely a religious dimension to this treatment of Kargil."<sup>24</sup>

The same position is held by Karbalai, former MLA and twice president of the Kargil HC. "If the Center was really 'serious and concerned' about the development of Ladakh, it should restore statehood. The Centre, he pointed out, would discuss Sixth Schedule status with leaders from both Leh and Kargil. (...) We are definitely going to make our point to the Center," said Karbalai.<sup>25</sup>

As we can see, the positions of both sides remain anchored on religion. In October 2019, just after the transformation of Ladakh into a UT, a delegation had asked for the recognition of Bhoti as the official language of Ladakh. Bhoti is classical Tibetan and, therefore, has a Buddhist connection. Religion thus remains the determining criterion.

## A difficult position

The violence of the Kargilis' reaction in fact conceals a much more nuanced position. Gupta summarizes it well.

The Kargilis never supported the Kashmiri rebellion against the central government that began in 1989. "In contrast to the calls for *azadi* (freedom) from India by the majority of Muslims in the Kashmir Valley, the people of Kargil have sought belonging in India. (...) Kargil has never extended support to separatist movements in the valley" (2022: 4). Then, she adds: "Muslim Kargilis never endorsed Ladakhi Buddhists' demand for Union Territory (UT) status first raised in the early 1990s, but they also remain deeply anchored in Ladakh" (ibid.). In brief, "Kargili Shi'as have sought to carve out a space for themselves that was neither subsumed within Kashmir nor overshadowed by Buddhist Ladakh."

"The deployment of communal idioms in the struggle for UT status by radical Buddhists since the 1990s led the Shi'a

Muslims of Kargil to seek a sense of psychological security in their ties with Kashmir. But the rise of insurgency in the Kashmir Valley in 1989 also led them to foreground their differences from the Valley to make clear their allegiance to India. Anxieties of being clubbed with the Valley Muslims, as they had often been before the Kargil War when their loyalty to India was still suspect, led to an emphasis on their territorial and cultural identification with Ladakh. Kargili Shi'as themselves have adopted the generalized framing of Shi'as as the 'good Muslims' as opposed to the Sunnis as 'bad Muslims.' Feeding the projection of Kargil as 'peaceful' in contrast to the Kashmir Valley is advantageous for it confers the concession of certain freedoms by the state" (p. 23).

The debate is reopened on pp. 113-114 concerning the Hill Council's refusal. "Although Kargil had shared the grievance in Leh that Ladakh was being marginalized within J&K, it rejected not only the demand for declaring Ladakh a UT but also the provision to set up a Hill Council in 1995. (...) A Kargili ex-member of parliament explained to me, 'At the time militancy in Kashmir was at its peak, and we feared that accepting the Hill Council might be construed as endorsing the separatists' demand for azadi [freedom]. There appeared to be confusion on the difference between autonomy within the nation-state and freedom from it.'" In the minds of the Kargilis, there would have been confusion between the demand for independence represented by the Kashmiri rebellion and the demand for autonomy represented by the UT rebellion. The Kargilis finally adopted the Hill Council (2003) after proving to the center their attachment to the Indian Union during the Kargil war (1999).

However, the Kargilis are not only rejecting Kashmir and Buddhist Ladakh; they are also rejecting Pakistan because they are not attracted by pan-Islamism. Moreover, the existence of anti-Shiite feelings in Pakistan seems to be another contributory factor:

"An awareness of the persecution of Shi'as in Pakistan, the lack of political representation in Gilgit-Baltistan and prosaic material realities of life across the LoC formed a prism through which life on the Indian side was constantly refracted." (page 6)

You get the impression that these poor Purigi cannot define their own identity. In fact, that is what Gupta says. They are against the Kashmiris because they are Sunni, pro-Pakistani or pro-independence, against the Pakistanis, because they persecute the Shiites, against the Leh district because they are Buddhists.

So how do you explain their violent reaction against Leh's attachment to a UT and for keeping it with Kashmir? Indeed, the reaction was unprecedentedly violent. It must be said that if the Kargilis have an identity problem, if they are in contradistinction with all their neighbors, there are degrees of rejection. The Kashmiris, although Sunni and pro-Pakistani, are rejected less strongly than the Buddhists of Leh, because they are Muslims.

## 2024: A 180-degree turn

The Buddhists wanted UT status because the HC's finances were controlled by Kashmir. The idea was that the central state would pay the budget directly to the HC. But they were soon disillusioned. The central government simply abolished the HC budget. The amount allocated to UT Ladakh for the fiscal year 2024-2025 is Rs 59.58 billion. Of this, Rs 6.68 billion is allocated to the two HCs, or just over 10 percent<sup>26</sup>. In other words, it is the central government that manages Ladakh. The two HCs are a shadow of their former selves.

This is what led the Purigis to join the Buddhists. Especially as, with the repeal of Article 370, they realize the risk of Indians from other states coming to buy land, set up businesses, and so on. There is also a risk that Ladakhis will become a minority in their own region (some have mentioned Tibet as a case in point). The two communities are now calling for Ladakh to become a federal state of the Indian Union with the application of the 6th schedule.

## Introduction of Tibetan script to Kargili country

A description of an important event will bring this article to a close. In 2024, an association from Leh, the *Himalayan Cultural Heritage Foundation*, signed an agreement with the *Jaffaria Academy of Modern Education* in Kargil, an English medium school attached to the Islamiya School, to establish the teaching of Tibetan script.

For the moment this may seem insignificant: a few courses in a single school. But the importance of the event can be seen by comparing it with what is happening on the other side of the LoC. In Skardu, another association is doing the same. This is the *Baltistan Cultural Foundation*. It has published a Tibetan writing manual for primary school pupils and installed a number of signs in Tibetan (Kenneth Iain Macdonald, 2006).

This is all the more important as literature already exists in the Kargili dialect but until now has been written in Arabic characters. The principal authors are Akhone Asgar Ali Basharat, Mohammad Ali Ashoor, and Haji Sadiq Ali Sadiq (who died in July 2020). Gupta mentions around ten names and even shows us a photo of a poets' club meeting (2022: 185).

If all these writers began writing in Tibetan characters, we would witness the birth of a national Ladakhi language. Is Ladakh in the process of becoming a nation that transcends religious divisions?<sup>27</sup>

Patrick Kaplanian is an independent researcher who has been working on Ladakh ethnology since 1975. In 1981, he published a monograph about Ladakhis and organized the second symposium on Ladakh in 1985, the proceedings of which he published twice. Moreover, he has written about 30 articles most of which are on hal. Kaplanian has also researched Greek mythology and the title of his thesis: "Analysis of the myth of Prometheus and Pandora, from Hesiod to the Caucasus."

## Endnotes

1. On Anderson see Kaplanian 2020b.
2. *Kalhön* (*bka' blon*), is a high-ranking title in the traditional hierarchy. It follows the titles of "King" and "Prince".
3. The *rinpoche* (*rin po che*) of Spituk, the most important Buddhist hierarch at the time.
4. MP: Member of Parliament, member of the national assembly in New Delhi.
5. MLA: Member of local Assembly. Member of the local assembly of J&K.
6. To combat inequality, the Indian constitution provides for the reservation of a certain number of places in government and universities for members of the most disadvantaged castes and ethnic groups. This is known as Scheduled Cast (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) status. The most "primitive" tribes and the untouchables are entitled to it.
7. All this is very well told by van Beek (1997). "Experts" came to divide the population of the two districts into tribes. There were 18 jeeps of "scientists" (ibid.: 32) that crisscrossed the country.
8. *History repeated in Ladakh (The Muslim viewpoint of the Ladakh agitation of 1989)*, published by the "Muslims of the Kargil district".
9. Zangskar is a landlocked valley where most of the population is Buddhist but which is attached to the Kargil district.
10. The HC of Kargil was not created until 2003.
11. It is necessary to specify that, after their conquest of Ladakh in 1834, the Dogra retained all the nobility and high clergy apparatus. The "king" no longer reigned, but it is clear from his appointment as deputy, a century later almost to the day, that the maharaja continued to rely on the old hierarchy. As for the *kalhön* of Leh, he was one of the most active in the "collaboration" with the occupation authorities. Consequently, he became the most powerful nobleman in Ladakh.
12. *Ihonpo* (*blon po*) is another noble title.

13. In 1981, I wrote:

"It is nevertheless remarkable that, after more than 130 years of Dogra, English, and then Kashmiri colonization, most attitudes remain unchanged, and that the monarchy and the nobility have retained their place: did not the Ladakhi elect their queen as a member of parliament in New Delhi in 1977? Do we not hear that in such and such a village the celebrations are more beautiful, because 'it is a village whose inhabitants are all servants of the palace', which is not true as the queen only has a few servants left?" (1981: 342, final paragraph of chapter XII, my translation).

14. Shina: an Indo-Aryan population. Most are Muslims; some Buddhist Shina are found in Ladakh.

15. Grist conducted the first part of her survey in 1993-1994.

16. The same is true for the consumption of alcohol, and the game of polo, which is nonetheless played in many Muslim courts.

17. When a *sayyid* leads a faction, he has the title of *rehbar*. Below him are the other *sayyid*, who are not faction leaders, and then the sheikhs and *akhuns*, who are Muslim scholars versed in the Koran. The most prestigious ones were educated in Iraq and/or Iran (see also Gupta, 2014: 379). The others were content with the local Koranic schools (madrassa).

18. The commemoration of the martyrdom of Hussain, the third Shiite imam, grandson of Muhammad and son of Ali and Fatima.

19. Tibetan refugees in Ladakh are considered foreigners and communicate with their hosts in Urdu.

20. Because Slovenes, Macedonians, and Kosovar Albanians are few in number, they carry little weight.

21. Musulman.

22. CM: Chief Minister, prime minister of the state of J&K as opposed to PM, prime minister of the central government in New Delhi.

23. For the record, in 2010 the Congress won 22 seats, the BJP 4.

24. Phrases quoted by Safwat Zargar, 6 October 2020.

<https://scroll.in/article/975010/ladakh-is-in-the-news-for-border-conflicts-but-its-residents-have-bigger-worries-than-china>. Accessed April 18, 2022.

25. By *Reach Ladakh* Correspondent Leh, Oct 22, 2019

<http://www.reachladakh.com/news/social-news/delegation-demands-bhoti-as-official-language-of-ut-ladakh?fbclid=IwAR3svRD8PHmnBo9dFKWIduXOIEiVjG1iiriCtXPsW4uNtAaKu6zOk48xvto>.

26. Dr Gulam Mustafa, *Daily Excelsior*, 10 February 2024. According to the *Stawa* newspaper, of January 2024, only 5% is received by HCs.

27. The author is grateful to John Bray for providing important documentation of events after August 19, 2019, and to a correspondent, who wishes to remain anonymous, who brings to the author's attention the emergence of a sense of exasperation on the part of some young Buddhists with regard to the abusive behavior of some LBA leaders. The author is also grateful to Judith Biron, for correcting his English.

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