

Ethnic Diversity in Ladakh

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Ethnicity is the characteristic basis on which societies have been divided in the contemporary world. The term ethnicity has been used in the same way as nationality, national grouping and minority. It was since the late 1960s that the term seems to be in wide use in social literature. However, it is not a new term but has been merely labeled differently[1]. Ethnicity as a concept has been defined in various ways by various scholars. They base ethnicity on varying factors. Some analysts include social distinctions based on racial or physiological characteristics, religion, language, culture, historical traditions, nationality or various aggregations of these factions. Others use the concept in a more restrictive manner particularly to isolate racial and nationality groupings[2].

The second problem with the concept of ethnicity pertains to the difficulty in comparing various types of ethnoses with one another.

The third problem relating to the concept is its relationship with the other forms of identification and conflict[3].

Aristides Zolberg (Inter-national Political Science Association Paper, 1976) tried to isolate ethnicity as a form of social segmentation. He argued that societies tend to have three primary sets of segmentation: cultural, territorial and class segmentation.

Cultural segmentation, according to Zolberg, can be accepted in a broad sense as segmentation based around normative values associated with religion, customs, ethical principles and historical traditions of a population grouping. Language is closely linked to these. Generally, people sharing these foregoing traits also share a common tongue. There are various cultural issues in a society, which involve things such as morality, educational politics and religious practices.

The social class sphere includes segmentation derived from socio-economic conditions within the society, in terms of both the political and economic relationship associated with them. Typical issues of this form of segmentation involve questions of income distribution and resource allocation between social classes.

The territorial segmentation is derived from the place of habitation of the population grouping. These issues are frequently concerned with the organisation and administration of the government. Hence, ethnicity may be defined as a type of cultural segmentation that may also intersect class and territorial segmentation. The initial basis of this differentiation is usually linked to the perception that the members of ethnic group possess a symbolically different geographic origin from the

dominant population. This difference in origin may have been of a recent origin or could be historical nature and is important because it provides the perceptual basis for differentiation. The perception of distinctiveness may also involve differences in historical traditions, social customs, language, physical appearance and religion, primarily due to variations in geographic origin[4].

According to Glazer and Moynihan (1973), Social Scientists tend to broaden the use of the term 'ethnic group' to refer not only to sub-groups and minorities, but to all the groups of society characterized by a distinct sense of difference owing to culture and descent. Das Gupta (1975) defines "ethnicity as an enclosing social device which makes out a recognizable social collectivity commoners often augmented by diachronic continuity". These shared characteristics that form the basis for ethnicity are not unalterable but rather change under altered circumstances as observed by Pandiyan (1987).

Dews and Ross (1980) defined ethnicity on four levels of analysis: (i) in respect to a social structural level; (ii) as a pattern of social interaction; (iii) as a subjective experience of ethnicity; (iv) as expressed in relatively fixed pattern of behaviour and expressive emotional styles.

Ethnicity in Ladakh

In Ladakh region of Jammu and Kashmir state ethnos can be differentiated on various basis, which are: (1) Origin (2) Regional Segmentation (3) Religion (4) Language (5) Dress and costumes (6) Political aspiration.

Origin

The racial origin of the populace of Ladakh is said to be a blend of the Aryans and Mongoloid[5]. The Mongoloids came from Tibet while Aryan came from other regions. The Mongoloid includes many ethnos of the contemporary period in Ladakh, which are Changpas, Botas, Puriks and Baltis. Aryans in Ladakh are either Dards (or Brokpas) or Mons. Dards as believed by Frankie had arrived in Ladakh after the Mons came there. Mons are considered the original inhabitants of Ladakh by Gergan (1987). They are believed to have been the rulers of Ladakh for long time and Ladakh itself got its original name Maryal which according to this hypothesis could be a corruption of Monyal i.e. country of Mons. But this thesis has not been accepted by most of the contemporary scholars and there is no historical evidence, on which it is based. Others (like Cunningham) believed that Mons are the descendents of a group of missionaries of Buddhism, who came from Kashmir and Ladakh, to disseminate their beliefs. But this theory also has been rejected (Rather, A.M. 1993) as the present social status of Mons in Ladakhi society dismisses the fact of their being the missionary people. They are opined to have arrived from Monyul (Kulu and Manali regions of Himachal Pradesh) to Ladakh. The Tibetan or Mongoloids are supposed to have come from Tibet. As mentioned by Franke (1907), Tibetans came as shepherds to Ladakh before the arrival of Mons and Dards, and later settled there.

Regional Segmentation

After the settlement of Tibetans in Ladakh they slowly dispersed into the different parts of the region and with the passage of time they got the name from the region that they were settled in.

Hence the people who are in Changthan, an extremely cold and dry area in South-East are called Changpas. They are much closer to their land of origin i.e. Tibet. Then the group of populace who live in Leh town and its adjoining area are mostly referred to as Botas. Those in Baltistan, in POK were called the Baltis. In Ladakh region they are found in Nubra valley and a few villages of Kargil district. The *Puriks* are mostly the inhabitants of Kargil-from Kargil to Lamyuru, and Chikthan, and Suru valley and Zaskar regions of Kargil.

The Bropa or Dards occupy Drass region of Kargil and Da, Hanu and Garkun villages of Leh district. These are in the lower region of Ladakh along the Indus river.

The Mons are not found occupying a particular region or locality. They are found, mostly in all the villages of lower and upper Ladakh. They are scattered in the shape of two or three families in each village, mostly in the adjoining part of Gumpa (Buddhist temple). It is because they work on the land allotted to them by Gumpas in exchange for being musician of the locality. There is a group of so-called Muslims Mons being referred to as Kharmons in a village called Fiang (16 kms away from Leh adjoining Leh-Srinagar highway). Generally, they are called Bedas by Ladakhis, they are the descendants of a group of musicians who accompanied Gyal Khatton the princess of Baltistan, on being married to king Jamyang Namagail of Ladakh[6]. Hence they are ethnically Baltis.

There is one more group of people inhabiting the Leh town and a few adjoining villages. They are the descendants of non-Ladakhis, mostly Kashmiris, who have married Ladakhi women and settled in Ladakh in the recent past. They are called Arguns[7].

Again, there is a group of people among the Buddhists who are called Bedas. They are similar in profession to the Mons for they used to sing and beg[8]. They did not live a settled life. They claim to be similar in origin to Mons.

Religion

The Changpas, who occupy Changthang (South-East of Ladakh) are Buddhists. *Botas* are both Muslims and Buddhists but *Puriks* are only Muslims and *Baltis* are also overwhelmingly Muslims. All these Muslim groups belong to *Ithna Ashria* (Shia) sect of Islam. Baltis living in Nubra valley are mostly *Noor Bakhshia Shia* Muslims. The Dards of Da, Hanu and some Garkun villages are Buddhists, and Dards living in the adjoining villages of this part are all Muslims (Shia, Ithna Ashria), while Dards living in Drass region are mostly Sunni with some percentage being Shia, Ithna Ashria and Noor Bakshia. Mons of Leh district are all Buddhists. The Muslim Mons of Leh are called Bedas. But the Buddhists Bedas, as mentioned earlier, are different from them. Some Muslim Mons are also found in Kargil district. Then there are Arguns of Leh town; they are mostly *Sunni* Muslims.

Language

There are two groups of languages spoken in Ladakh. One is of Tibetan origin and another of Dardi. The Tibetan languages are Ladakhi, Purik and Balti, and Dard languages. Dardi of Drass

people and another dialect of this language, Shina, are spoken by Hanu people. The Dard groups cannot understand one another's language. Gergan believed that Mons too had a different language called Monskat, which became extinct with the passage of time[9].

Costumes

The Ladakhi Bota wears a long coat with a belt of cotton preferably red cloth. They also wear a cylindrical woolen cap with wide brimmed edge. This cap is worn by both men and women. But Muslim males seldom wear it. Woman's cap is smaller and brighter than that of a man. Women also wear a goat-skin covering their backs, which has gradually been replaced with coloured woolen shawls, preferably worn on auspicious occasions. They also wear a headgear called Perak, made of black lamb skin. It covers the forehead with its snuggy long and tapering end going down till the waist. It has two triangular flaps for covering the ears. The Peraks are studded in rows with turquoise and precious stones and the number of such stones is an index of the person's economic status[10].

The Muslim women wear a head covering of dupatta or chadar under the traditional woolen cap.

This dress pattern is similar among the Botas, Mons and Bedas of Ladakh. However, as per traditions, Mons or Bedas women cannot wear a Perak. It is probably due to economic backwardness of these people, as Perak is a very costly item and women generally inherit it from their ancestors. However, a Beda woman called Tashi Putit, who is a famous singer of Ladakh, wears a Perak.

Among Changpas the dress pattern is different from that of other Ladakhis. They wear Goncha made of fur-sheepskin. The shape of their cap is also different, which also is made of fur. It is due to extreme climatic conditions that they require such dress. Their Goncha is shorter in length but broader than that of Ladakhis and it has breast portion open, among males. Their dress pattern is much closer to people of Tibet.

In case of Puriks (rural Ladakhis also) the Goncha is generally made of locally woven wool. They do not wear cap of Ladakhi form. Women among them wear a Gonchan of different cut than that of Ladakhis. However, sheep or goat skin is worn by women like other Ladakhi women. The youth among them, as well as among Baltis, make widespread use of Kashmiri *Phiran* now, while as in case of Ladakhis, Muslims as well as Buddhists, have western styled dresses such as jacket, which is in vogue, among females as well.

The Brokpas of Hanu and Da Villages wear Goncha made of locally woven, white woolen cloth and wear a woolen cap, similar in shape to the cap worn by people of Kulu and Kyelang, but bigger and exchanged with wool in winter. They decorate their caps with rows of needles, silver coins, buttons and cowery shells. They also fix coloured ribbons, silver jewellery and cheap corals[11]. Flowers fascinate them and so they wear flowers of different colours on their caps, even plastic flowers are being used for the purpose.

The Muslim Brokpas of Drass and adjoining area of Kargil district have a long Phiran like Goncha. The difference being that the Kashmiri Phiran is shorter and without belt. As we proceed towards

Kashmir, Phiran become shorter and without belt. However, their men do not wear goncha but prefer to wear coat and pyjama. These people do not use Ladakhi or Hanu styled cap and neither do they decorate their dress.

Political traditions of these people are also quite varied. The political history of past thirty years says that the people of Leh district were politically divided into two groups; one called Congress-A and another Congress-B. The former comprised the Buddhists of the region and later included Muslims. However, there was a small percentage of Muslims in the Congress-A group, who were designated as traitors (Gaddar) by the Muslims in general. Similarly, a small percentage of Buddhists were allies of Congress-B. Remarkably, these Buddhists were the disciples of Kushok Tadaon, spiritual leader of the Red sect of Buddhism in Ladakh-Fiang and Lamyur Gompas, presently a minister in J&K state. The Congress-A group had attachment with national level party congress and Congress-B had with state level parties, viz., National Conference. The former was in favour of and strived for central rule in Ladakh. The tradition continued and presently we find, most of the Buddhists are attached to central parties such as Indian National Congress, BJP and Muslims along with Kushok Tokdan of Fiang are in favour of National Conference – the main political party of J&K state.

It was on the basis of these political differences, between Muslims and Buddhists that there was a social strife between them, which led to the unfortunate event of social boycott from, 1989 to 1992. It was only after the provision of Hill Development Council to Leh that the boycott ended. However, the position was different in Kargil. The communal boycott was not observed in any part of Kargil district, though both the communities reside in close proximity in many places, and the majority of them are Muslims.

People of Kargil are also divided on the basis of political aspirations, as witnessed during the recent elections. The elite group of Kargil people favoured National Congress candidate and the poor and lower class people fought for the success of National Conference candidate. However, one does not observe the continuity of political ideology on the same pattern as it is seen in Leh district. However, these people have always been against any issue, which would separate them from the Kashmiris or the state, as a whole. They did not accept the proposal of providing separate Regional Hill Council to the region, as reported by some eminent leaders of the region, in an informal discussion among themselves.

Conclusion

Ethnically, Ladakh society can be divided into three segments: cultural, social and territorial. Each of these includes varying characteristics. These segments can be represented by three mathematical sets representing separate ethnic groups, intersecting each other. Such intersection of all the three segments gives rise to a group which comprises traits from all the three segments; while at the same time, intersection of any other two segments gives rise to further three groups i.e. those, which involve traits from any two segments. However, the traits can change from one form to another, and that way Ladakh society is a rich mosaic of diverse ethnic groups, engaged in peaceful interaction with one another.

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