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Dangerous Liaisons: Hindu Nationalism and Buddhist Radicalism in Ladakh

One day, I fear, like in Ayodhya, the lie will outlive the reality and this magic land of Buddha, where the mountains change colour every time the sun shifts—from green to orange to purple to suddenly blazing gold at midday—may become yet another political battlefield where religion will divide people, create dissonance, change cultures, rewrite history, falsify our past. In the name of truth, patriotism, faith.”

—Pritish Nandy¹

ON JULY 1, 2002, a signboard outside the Jokhang Vihara in Leh bazaar announced a press conference to be held that afternoon at the headquarters of the Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) in the same complex. There, the president of the LBA, Tsering Samphel, shared with a handful of local scribes his joy over the resolutions passed a day earlier in New Delhi by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) calling for the trifurcation of

1. Pritish Nandy, “Ladakh Is Too Innocent for Bloodshed,” Rediff on the Net, 9 November 2000.

the state of Jammu and Kashmir, granting statehood to Jammu and the Kashmir Valley, and Union Territory status to Ladakh. Tsering Samphel later explained to me that this was a very happy occasion indeed, as the LBA now had “support across the length and breadth of the country.” Soon after, the resolutions were dismissed by Union Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani, freshly elevated to deputy prime minister, as trifurcation of the state would weaken India’s case in the Kashmir dispute. The RSS responded by pledging its support to an agitation by the Jammu and Kashmir Nationalist Front, led by RSS supporters, soon after amalgamated in a movement called the Jammu State Mukti Morcha. A spokesman for the RSS was reported to have denied that support for trifurcation of the state was communal, insisting that it was necessary on the basis of geography and the injustice and discrimination of the people of Jammu and Ladakh.²

In the context of the Kashmir issue, the non-Valley regions and populations rarely figure prominently in national awareness or public debates. Ladakhi representatives do not, as a rule, get invited to participate in discussions on the future of Kashmir; even the Hurriyat Conference has only recently sought to establish a dialogue with Ladakhi leaders.³ Internationally, the Ladakh region is practically invisible, hardly ever earning more than a few lines in the many tomes dedicated to the Kashmir issue.⁴ Although Ladakh is by far the largest constituent region of Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir, totalling 59,246 square kilometers (58 percent of the territory), its population of almost 230,000 is a mere 2.31 percent.⁵ With four assembly seats and one lone Lok Sabha seat, Ladakh hardly figures in electoral arithmetic. But Ladakh is also widely regarded as a relatively unproblematic region: the Kashmir militancy has barely affected the region directly, and its majority population of Tibetan Buddhists are widely regarded as inherently peaceful and patriotic. The fact that almost half the population of the region are Muslims does not generally find a place in Indian popular imagination, which sees

2. See, for example, “RSS to Press for Trifurcation” in *The Indian Express*, 5 July 2002, web edition.

3. The one exception to Kashmiri militant disinterest in Ladakh has been Shabir Shah, who has repeatedly visited Ladakh since his release from prison in 1995.

4. A notable recent exception is Navnita Chadha Behera’s interesting study, *State, Identity and Violence: Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2000).

5. Data from the Census of India, 2001, web site: www.censusindia.net.

Ladakh predominantly as a quaint, colorful backdrop for adventure holidays, populated by maroon-robed lamas living in whitewashed monasteries perched on hilltops.

Since 1989, this image of Ladakh as Shangri-La has begun to crack, first by the launch of an agitation with strong communal overtones in which the Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) demanded secession from Kashmir and Union Territory status for Ladakh. The level of violence of this agitation was negligible by comparison with the bloodshed in the Kashmir Valley, and by 1993 negotiations between Center, State and the LBA had resulted in a reconciliation between Buddhist and Muslim organizations and concession of a Ladakh Hill Development Council for Leh district—although implementation only took place in 1996. Ladakh, as far as Indian public interest was concerned, lapsed back into its state of remote, strategic border region, the site of “routine exchanges of fire” along the Line of Control. In 1999, the Kargil conflict brought the region international attention. Bose may well be right that “the Kargil episode may yet go down as a bizarre if lengthy footnote in the history of the Kashmir conflict.”⁶ But in Ladakh, the Kargil conflict has triggered a significant increase in the flow of central government funds and other benefits. It also has had important consequences for relations between Buddhists and Muslims, as well as between Ladakh and Kashmir, directly and because of the heightened attention for the region from Hindu nationalists. Political leaders and activists from both Leh and Kargil used the opportunity offered by the media attention to promote their demands for a greater share of development resources and more autonomy; in 2000 the LBA relaunched its agitation for Union Territory status for Ladakh.

There are significant parallels between the ways in which Kashmiri militants regard their relationship with India, and that in which many Ladakhis perceive theirs with Kashmir. Whereas Kashmiri secessionists consider India as an oppressive, colonial power, Ladakhi autonomy movement leaders look upon Kashmir as their colonizer; and just as Kashmir’s accession is regarded as illegitimate by radicals in the valley, Ladakhi representatives have repeatedly stated that their

6. Sumantra Bose, “Kashmir: Sources of Conflict, Dimensions of Peace,” *Survival* 41, no. 3, 149–71.

bonds with Kashmir are only those of having been ruled by the same Dogra maharajas, and hence that Ladakh should now be free;⁷ Kashmir and Ladakh both claim the right to self-determination, although Ladakhi leaders have said that they have opted for accession to India; and while Kashmiri movements seek to free the region from India, Ladakhi movements have for decades sought to “Free Ladakh from Kashmir,” as stickers, posters and graffiti proclaimed in 1989. Most importantly, for the present discussion, in Kashmir as well as Ladakh, the language and practices of religious radicalism have come to play a significant role in the respective struggles, suggesting that at the heart of the matter in both cases lie fundamental incompatibilities of religious and cultural identity. As pointed out in many recent analyses of the Kashmiri struggle, religious radicals hijacked the movement in the 1992–93 period, and over time the local component among the militants and the local agenda of independence have been marginalized.⁸ In the case of Ladakh, communalism was an important feature of the agitation for Union Territory status launched in 1989. This communalization was part of the Buddhist political elite’s strategy to gain the ear of the central government, although the movement and its aims historically had been anti-Kashmiri rather than anti-Muslim, and a common platform with the region’s Muslims was soon re-established after negotiations with the central government over the Ladakhi demand for autonomy began in earnest. However, since the rise to power of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 1998, and particularly after the Kargil conflict and the resumption of the agitation for Union Territory status by the LBA, communal idioms have gained importance again. The question is, why religious radicalism and communalist idioms came to play such an important role in Ladakh, how this development can be understood in terms of both internal and exogenous factors, and what consequences this may have for peace and security in the region.

7. See, for example, the argument as presented in the “Memorandum submitted to the PM in 1949 by Chhewang Rigzin, President, Buddhist Association of Ladakh on behalf of the People of Ladakh,” *Hindu World* 41 (February 1949), 30–33.

8. See, for example, Behera, *State, Identity and Violence*; Sumantra Bose, *The Challenge in Kashmir: Democracy, Self-Determination and a Just Peace* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1997); Sumit Ganguly, *The Crisis in Kashmir: Portents of War, Hopes of Peace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Tavleen Singh, *Kashmir: A Tragedy of Errors* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1996).

The case of Ladakh, despite or perhaps because of the region's supposed marginality to the Kashmir question as a whole, illuminates in multiple ways the causes and dynamics of religious radicalism in secessionist struggles in the subcontinent. First, as I have argued extensively elsewhere, the Ladakhi case shows, upon close examination of the historical and ethnographic record, that identitarian readings of the movement and its communalization—taking the religious communities as given and the claims of their representatives at face value—fail to capture the underlying causes of the conflict and do not provide a sufficient explanation for the communal form that the demand for secession has taken in the late 1980s.⁹ Second, and relatedly, it is clear that local agency is crucially important for understanding the communalization of the movement for secession from Kashmir, but in itself must be placed in the broader context of the dynamics and idioms of Indian politics. As argued by Paul Brass, local villagers, or in this case Ladakhi Buddhists, should not be regarded as innocent victims of exogenous communalist forces.¹⁰ Also in Ladakh, local political actors, as I will discuss in more detail below, have been actively fostering communalist representations of the Ladakhis' plight.¹¹ Local stereotypes and suspicions about other communities, including perceptions of the character and direction of the Indian political system, are shaped as well as recast and deployed in the pursuit of local political agendas. Hansen rightly notes that “communal consciousness and stereotypes are ... integrated parts of the social and political imaginary in many parts of India.”¹² The point is not that all Indian politics is communal, but that it is *perceived* in Ladakh to be rooted in communalism. The third necessary element of an analysis of the causes, dynamics, and consequences of religious radicalism must be the role of this broader context in which local politics plays out, and which in turn informs.

9. See, for example, Martijn van Beek, “Beyond Identity Fetishism: ‘Communal’ Conflict in Ladakh and the Limits of Autonomy,” *Cultural Anthropology* 15, no. 4:525–69, and “Hill Councils, Development, and Democracy: Assumptions and Experiences from Ladakh,” *Alternatives* 24, no. 4:435–59.

10. Paul Brass, *Theft of an Idol: Text and Context in the Representation of Collective Violence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

11. In this connection, the fear expressed by Pritish Nandy in the quotation at the beginning of this essay describes a situation already in existence in Ladakh.

12. Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 215.

The past decade has seen a dramatic change in the political landscape in India with the rise to power of the sangh parivar. The language of secularism may still be deployed by the BJP, but the political imaginary of Hindutva is obviously reshaping the conception of nationhood and belonging in India and is giving religion a new and more radical salience and legitimacy in the political field.¹³ Ladakh's Buddhist political leadership has been quick to seize the opportunities it sees for promotion of its cause of Union Territory for Ladakh. Although the LBA strongly condemned the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya and expressed its solidarity with the Muslims of the country, it has over the past three years actively sought to improve its links with the RSS and VHP, culminating for the time being in the resolutions passed by these organizations at their national conventions in 2002. As I will argue in the following, it would be a mistake to regard this cozy relationship as expressive of an uncritical and unbridled enthusiasm on the part of the Buddhists in Leh for the cause of Hindutva. Rather, as has been the case with the playing of the communal card in 1989, the LBA believes it can use the sangh parivar to keep pressure on the Center for its demands, while at the same time avoiding being swallowed up by the Hindu nationalists. As I will argue below, Ladakhi Buddhist fears of Islamic radicalism—and more generally of being outnumbered by Muslims—are paralleled by similar fears of being overrun by Hindus from the plains.¹⁴

Ladakhis, including the population of Shi'ite-dominated Kargil district, are struggling for a better life, economic prosperity, and greater political control over their affairs. They fear being marginalized even further, whether under Kashmiri or Indian administration. The alliance with radical forces in India, or, as in the case of Kargil, in Iran, must also be seen in this light, as a strategic and defensive response to perceived threats to local interests. Religious radicalism in the region is not, as I have already indicated, a strictly exogenous phenomenon, but the external dimension is crucial

13. Excellent accounts of the rise of the BJP and the communalization of Indian politics can be found in Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in Indian Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) and in Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*.

14. The example of the Buddhist regions of Himachal Pradesh, where local Buddhists take additional Hindu names, where the economy is increasingly dominated by Hindus, and where Buddhism is thought to be in serious decline, is frequently cited as the *other* danger facing Ladakh.

to its evolution and emanations. The use of communalist strategies has obvious dangers for local peace and stability, as well as for the region as a whole, first and most obviously because of the specter of rising local religious radicalism. As I will discuss in the following, the increasingly communal rhetoric of the LBA comes at a time when signals are emerging from Kargil that political leaders and community organizations there are considering to join the demand for Union Territory.¹⁵ This rapprochement from the side of the Shi'ite majority in Kargil is jeopardized by the radicalization of the LBA's rhetoric and alliances. Beyond such immediate local political-strategic concerns, the alignment of the LBA with radical Hindutva forces is regarded by some as dangerous, because Kashmir and Ladakh are pawns in the political games of more powerful religious radicals based beyond the region. To the extent that the Ladakhi movement is seen as a struggle for cultural survival, subsumption by the Hindu nationalists, it is feared, might well subject Ladakh's Buddhists to the fate of their co-religionists on the southern slopes of the Himalaya.

Before discussing in more detail the recent rise of Hindutva forces in Ladakh and their relationship with local political actors and organizations, it is necessary to go back in time briefly in order to appreciate the extent to which radical religious movements from other parts of the subcontinent have shaped political mobilization in Ladakh.

Organizing the Buddhists

THE LATE NINETEENTH and early twentieth century saw the emergence of a host of religious community and caste-based reform movements throughout the Indian subcontinent. Jammu and Kashmir were no exception: in Jammu, the Dogra Sabha for Hindus was formed as early as 1903, the Anjuman-i-Nusrat-ul-Islam in Srinagar was founded in 1905, and the Yuvak Sabha seeking to

15. In the summer of 2002, the two major rival factions on the Kargil scene, the Islamiya Public School faction and the Imam Khomeini Memorial Trust (KMT), buried their differences and withdrew their support from the National Conference, supporting an independent candidate for the Assembly elections instead. There appears to have emerged consensus for a more forceful pursuit of regional interests, including the establishment of a hill development council for Kargil and a "regional council" for Ladakh as a whole. The KMT continues to reject the Leh demand for Union Territory status.

promote the interests of the Hindu (“Pandit”) community in the valley in 1915.¹⁶

The 1920s and early 1930s were characterized by growing resistance to the rule of the Hindu Maharaja, and in the wake of violent clashes in 1931, the British government in India instituted a commission of inquiry into the grievances and complaints of the different communities of the state. It was in this connection that the first organization purporting to represent the interests of the Buddhist community of the state was formed, the Kashmir Raj Bodhi Maha Sabha (KRBMS). “Those were the days of political upheaval in the Kashmir State. The Sabha, therefore, had to devote its attention and energy to the cause of the forty thousand helpless and downtrodden Buddhists of Ladakh whose case in the general scramble for percentages, would otherwise have gone by default.”¹⁷ The KRBMS was not a Ladakhi organization, but the creation of a handful of neo-Buddhist Pandits based in Srinagar who had secured the sole right to representation of the Buddhists of the state from Ladakh’s foremost religious leader at the time, Skushok Stagtsang Raspa of Hemis monastery.¹⁸ Soon after, in 1933, the first local Buddhist organization, the Ladakh Buddhist Education Society (LBES), was formed with the direct involvement from the well-known writer-activist Rahula Sankrtyayana, who visited the region in 1926 and 1933 in the context of his work for the Arya Samaj.¹⁹ Already during his first visit he had discussed with prominent religious leaders, including Stagtsang Raspa and Sras Rinpoche of Ridzong monastery, the dangers of growing numbers of Muslims and the low birth rate among Buddhists due to monasticism and polyandry. The LBES was dissolved in 1938 and

16. See, for example, Alastair Lamb, *Kashmir: A Disputed Legacy. 1846–1990* (Lahore: Oxford University Press, 1992), and Aparna Rao, “A Tortuous Search for Justice: Notes on the Kashmir Conflict,” *Himalayan Research Bulletin* 15, no. 1: 9–20.

17. KRBMS, *Triennial Report of the Kashmir Raj Bodhi Maha Sabha* (Srinagar: Kashmir Raj Bodhi Maha Sabha, 1935), 4.

18. For details about the KRBMS and the role of Kashmiri Pandits in the early organization of Ladakh’s Buddhists, see Kristoffer Brix Bertelsen, “Protestant Buddhism and Social Identification in Ladakh,” *Archives de Sciences sociales des Religions* 99 (juillet-septembre), 129–51.

19. See Martijn van Beek, “Rahul Sankrtyayana and Early Buddhist Organisation in Ladakh,” *Ladakh Studies* 16:23–27 for a more detailed discussion. Sankrtyayana’s own accounts of his visits to Ladakh were published in Rahula Sankrtyayana, *Meri ladakh yatra* (Ilahabad: Kitab Mahal, 1939); *Meri jivan-yatra*, vol. 1 (Ilahabad: Kitab Mahal, 1950); *Meri jivan-yatra 2* (Kolkata: Adhuniya Pustak Bhavan, 1951); and *Yatra ke panne* (Dehradun: Sahitya Sadana, 1952).

replaced by the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA), which again had strong involvement of Kashmiri Pandits, at least in the years until independence. From the start, then, modern Ladakhi Buddhist activism was strongly informed by outsiders and their understanding of the Indian political system, as well as what they thought was good for the Ladakhi Buddhists.

A Separate Nation by All the Tests: The Struggle for Autonomy

PARTITION AND THE TUMULTUOUS disputed accession of Jammu and Kashmir to the Indian union changed the focus of the Ladakh Buddhist Association, as the YMBA renamed itself, from a concern with improvement of the fate of the Buddhists within the state through the promotion of education and the combating of social evils, to asserting the right to self-determination and the need for secession of Ladakh from Jammu and Kashmir State. Ladakh, it was argued, was "a separate nation by all the tests—race, language, religion, and culture determining nationality."²⁰ From a Ladakhi perspective, the shift from Dogra rule to Kashmiri Muslim rule meant merely the exchange of one discriminatory regime with another. Although communal tension and violence in other parts of the subcontinent did have some impact on Muslim-Buddhist relations in Ladakh, there was no sustained or widespread breakdown of communal amity in Leh or Kargil.²¹

At least during the first two decades after Independence, linking the demands for autonomy in Jammu and Ladakh appears to have been part of the strategy of Hindu activists in Jammu rather than of the Buddhists of Ladakh. In Jammu in 1952, growing dissatisfaction with the alleged pro-Kashmiri policies of Sheikh Abdullah led to an agitation against Muslim dominance

20. "Memorandum submitted by Kalon Tsewang Rigzin, President, YMBA, in July 1949 to Jawaharlal Nehru," reproduced e.g., in Bal Raj Madhok, *Kashmir: Center of New Alignments* (New Delhi: Deepak Prakashan, 1963) and Behera, *State, Identity and Violence*.

21. There is disagreement among local scholars and witnesses over whether the Muslims wholeheartedly joined the efforts to defend Ladakh against the raiders, or whether they at least initially refused to join the Home Guard raised by Kalon Tsewang Rigzin and others, as asserted e.g., by Shridhar Kaul and H. N. Kaul, *Ladakh Through the Ages: Towards a New Identity* (New Delhi: Indus Publishing Company, 1992), 71–72, 170–72.

spearheaded by the Praja Parishad and drawing support from the Bharatiya Jan Sangh, the Hindu Mahasabha, the Ram Rajya Parishad and others.²² The Praja Parishad made explicit reference to the Ladakhi Buddhists in formulating their grievances against Muslim dominance, although its agenda for complete amalgamation of Jammu and Kashmir with the Indian Union was not shared by Ladakhi Buddhist leaders, who have always preferred direct rule from Delhi and secession from Kashmir.²³ Ladakh's political scene at this time was dominated by Kushok Bakula Rinpoche, the leading cleric of the Gelugpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism in Ladakh, who was made a cabinet minister in the Bakshi government in 1957. The Bakshi regime gave concessions to Ladakhi and Jammu demands, while at the same time deftly sabotaging the emergence of organized regional opposition to his regime in Jammu.

In 1962, when elections were held for the first time in Ladakh, local opposition against Bakula Rinpoche emerged, including both Buddhists and Muslims, and demanding a more forceful approach to promote Ladakhi demands. A key demand was the introduction of central administration along the lines of the system applied to the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA). In fact, Ladakh did indeed come under central administration for a brief period in the wake of the Sino-Indian war of 1962, but this was withdrawn soon after G.M. Sadiq took over the reins of power in 1964. This in turn triggered resistance in Ladakh. Sadiq partly coopted Ladakh's leadership and simultaneously sought to split Ladakhi Buddhist unity by supporting Sonam Norbu and Khanpo Rinpoche of Thikse monastery against Bakula Rinpoche and his followers.²⁴ This faction was known as Congress "B" in Ladakh and included many prominent Muslims as well as Buddhists, which illustrates once more the impossibility of reducing Ladakhi politics at this time to a contest between monolithic

22. Behera, *State, Identity and Violence*, 85.

23. The Ladakhi Muslim leaders' views at this time are difficult to ascertain. At this time, of course, Ladakh was a unified district with a slight Buddhist majority population.

24. The split between Thikse and Bakula reflected a number of different pre-existing faultlines both within and across religious communities in Ladakh. Sadiq apparently successfully exploited these fissures, rather than creating them. See also Behera, *State, Identity and Violence*, 119–20. The intricacies of factionalism in Ladakh are discussed in more detail in van Beek, "Beyond Identity Fetishism."

religious communities.²⁵ Bakula and his followers launched a campaign for NEFA-type administration to be restored, but to no avail.

In 1969, however, a prolonged agitation with decidedly communal overtones broke out in Ladakh, demanding NEFA-type administration as well as a host of other concessions.²⁶ The agitation faded quickly after Bakula Rinpoche and his right-hand man Sonam Wangyal accepted minor concessions from Sadiq, while most major demands remained unfulfilled. The agitation and the alleged sell-out by Bakula Rinpoche to the Kashmir government caused a further deepening of the rifts in the Buddhist community, while the communal idiom of the agitation eroded the possibilities for a united Ladakhi movement for autonomy at this time.

The Normalization of Communalism

THE COMMUNALIZATION of the 1969 agitation is regarded by some contemporaries as a manipulation by Bakula Rinpoche and Sonam Wangyal, but the playing of the communal card was also part of the standard repertoire of Kashmiri and Indian politics, and increasingly significant. Sheikh Abdullah, albeit advocating a staunchly secularist political agenda, was well known for citing the Quran in his public speeches, preferably delivered from the Hazratbal mosque. As suggested by Behera, G.M. Sadiq had let the Jan Sangh develop in Jammu, as they were expected to be less of a threat than a regional party on non-communal lines.²⁷ The Congress, when it came to power with Mir Qasim, allowed the Jamaat-i-Islami to solidify its base in the valley while the Jan Sangh continued to develop in Jammu, so that the Congress could present itself as the guardian of the interests of the minorities. Sheikh Abdullah, after his return to power, pitched his vision for the future in terms of a Greater Kashmir, claiming Muslim-majority Doda and Kargil district (carved out of Ladakh

25. See also B. L. Kak, *Chasing Shadows in Ladakh* (New Delhi: Light and Life Publishers, 1978) and Kaul and Kaul, *Ladakh Through the Ages*, for discussions of Ladakhi politics in the 1960s.

26. These included, among others, the settlement of Tibetan refugees who had entered the region in the wake of China's occupation of Tibet, the recognition of the "bodhi" language, establishment of a degree college, and representation of Buddhists in the government.

27. Behera, *State, Identity and Violence*.

district in 1979) as part of this Kashmir, which shared nothing but religion. By the late 1970s, the political process in the state, as in other parts of India, had become thoroughly communalized.²⁸

Despite this process of communalization, the LBA generally kept its distance from Hindu nationalist forces in Jammu, although it did accept and welcome expressions of support from that side. During the 1967 and 1969 agitations, the Jan Sangh had expressed its support for Ladakhi demands, and also in 1981, when the demand for Union Territory was raised, Hindu nationalist forces expressed their support for the Ladakhi cause. However, it was not until the agitations of the late 1980s that the LBA was in more regular contact with national outfits such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Bharatiya Janata Party. This was partly the result of a conscious choice by a new generation of LBA leaders to play the communal card in the struggle for Union Territory for Ladakh. The new leadership had strong roots in the Congress party, and had become convinced that communalism was necessary to get the attention of the national government. Having watched agitation after agitation fail because of the cooptation of leaders and the splitting of the Ladakhi front, these younger leaders, most of whom had been educated at prestigious institutions in India, decided a more forceful approach was necessary to create a sustained movement. A more active relationship with Hindu nationalist forces was an element of this new approach.

In 1988, the alleged abduction of fifty Buddhist children from Ladakh, who had been taken to Srinagar by Christian missionaries, made national headlines and drew expressions of support from the Arya Samaj and the VHP, including demonstrations by “hundreds of activists” in Delhi.²⁹ In September 1989, the BJP Central Office in New Delhi sent a delegation led by Ashwini Kumar and Chaman Lal Gupta to Leh to carry out an on-the-spot investigation of the causes

28. A well-informed journalist's indictment of the political establishment's mishandling of Kashmir and the communalization of its politics is Tavleen Singh's *Kashmir: A Tragedy of Errors*.

29. Press release dated 22 June 1968, Indraprastha Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Delhi. It is worth noting that a considerable number of the explosions recorded in Jammu and Kashmir in 1988 took place in Ladakh as part of the anti-Christian agitation. According to Home Ministry statistics for January 1988 to June 1993, a total of 184 violent incidents resulting in four deaths were recorded for Leh district. See Robert G. Wirsing, *India, Pakistan, and the Kashmir Dispute: On Regional Conflict and Its Resolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 128–31.

of the agitation that had begun in July that year and which in August had led to the death of three people in police firing.³⁰ Later, the BJP repeatedly wrote to the prime minister, Narasimha Rao, to press for the Ladakhi demand, and members of the BJP asked questions in parliament on behalf of the Ladakhis. In March 1990, a national convention on the Ladakh issue was held in Delhi, with leading BJP members such as Ashwini Kumar on the organizing committee. In August 1990, a delegation from the LBA participated for the first time in a BJP convention at Jammu. At a Jammu press conference concluding the meetings, BJP leader Atal Behari Vajpayee expressed his support for Union Territory for Ladakh.³¹ Hari Om, in a lengthy report on the conference, described the Ladakhi participation as “historic,” as also Kashmiri Pandits expressed their “unstinted and unqualified support” for the cause of Jammu and Ladakh.³² Thupstan Chhewang, then president of the LBA, was quoted as saying: “For 43 years the people of Jammu and Ladakh have been denied their constitutional rights. We have been struggling for justice, but separately. Let us unite, for our sufferings are common.” But despite these professions of solidarity and cooperation, the LBA leadership let the relationship with the Hindu nationalists lapse into near-oblivion, not responding to invitations from the Jammu Mahasabha for a joint platform and from the BJP general secretary to participate in the BJP’s All-India session in February 1991. The LBA did, however, send a telegram congratulating Advani and Vajpayee on their success in the 1991 Lok Sabha elections, expressing the LBA’s conviction that the “nation will emerge stronger and Ladakh will receive special attention under your leadership.”³³

30. Their report, dated 19 September 1989, limits itself largely to listing the various grievances and demands of the LBA, as well as an overview of previous agitations since 1969. It mentions the arrest of four Buddhist boys in 1988 for “terrorist activity” but does not mention the campaign against the Christians, which included attacks with explosives on Christian-owned buildings and vehicles. For concise discussions of the 1989 agitation and its background, see John Bray, “Ladakhi History and Indian Nationhood,” *South Asia Research* 11, no. 2:115–33, and Martijn van Beek and Kristoffer Brix Bertelsen, “Ladakh: ‘Independence’ Is Not Enough,” *Himal* 8, no. 2 (March/April), 7–15.

31. *Daily Excelsior*, 2 September 1990, 1.

32. Hari Om, “Jammu and Ladakh: BJP–LBA Unity, I.,” *Daily Excelsior*, 16 September 1990, 10.

33. Quoted from a carbon copy of the original undated telegram kept in the LBA archives in Leh.

The sudden decline in the LBA's and Buddhist leaders' interest in openly sharing the dais with Hindu nationalist forces can be explained by two related developments. First, the central government had made it clear at an early stage of negotiations for a Hill Council for Ladakh, which began in January 1990, that such a concession could not be made unless there was a united (i.e., non-communal) demand for such an arrangement. In view of this pressure, the LBA lifted at the end of 1992 the "social boycott" that it had imposed on the entire Muslim population of the region in 1989, and a joint "Coordination Committee" was formed with representatives from the Buddhist, Shia and Sunni, and Christian communities. Clearly, this made it difficult to simultaneously pursue a communalist alliance with the forces of Hindutva. Especially after the demolition of the Babri Masjid, which had been condemned swiftly by the LBA, overt alliances with BJP and VHP were out of the question. Secondly, negotiations with the Center, especially after the return to power of the Congress (I) under the prime ministership of P.V. Narasimha Rao, suggested that the Hill Council would be granted in a matter of months, so that the need for opposition pressure on the government became less important. The Congress, despite its role in fueling the flames of communalism in Jammu and Kashmir, continued to have a public image in Ladakh of secularism and pro-minority stances. Most of Ladakh's political leaders were or had been Congress members, and eventually the Congress won all thirty elected seats on the Hill Council when it was finally formed in 1995.

Although it would be an exaggeration to suggest that relations between Buddhists and Muslims were cordial by the mid-1990s, there seemed to be little political mileage to be gained at this time from national alliances with the sangh parivar. At the local level, however, relations between Buddhists and Muslims remained tense, as symbolized by a "loudspeaker war" between the Sunni mosque and the Buddhist Chokhang Vihara, on opposite sides of the main bazaar of Leh.³⁴ But while there was little immediate interest from the Buddhist radicals' side in maintaining or reviving contacts with the

34. From 1996 until 1999, every time the call for prayer would sound from the mosque, the LBA switched on a tape with religious chants or songs. The practice was in retaliation for the fact that several local mosques in the suburbs and villages around Leh had installed loudspeakers.

Hindu nationalists, there was growing interest from the latter in developments in Ladakh.

Local political processes and strategic considerations of Buddhist and Muslim leaders in Ladakh played a major part in the evolution of communal politics in the region, but this development was informed to a considerable degree by the broader national political context. Arguably, national developments have played a still more significant part in shaping relations between Buddhist radicals and Hindu nationalist forces more recently. Especially since 1997, the sangh parivar has taken a more active interest in Ladakh. This interest has resulted in two major RSS initiatives in Ladakh: the Sindhu Darshan Abhiyan and the Ladakh Kalyan Sangh.

***Sindhu hai ji!* The RSS Discovers Ladakh**

IN OCTOBER 1997, the first Sindhu Darshan took place, a pilgrimage to the river Indus in Ladakh. The initiative for the event had been taken by Lal Krishna Advani, then president of the BJP, together with Tarun Vijay, the editor of the RSS weekly *Panchjanya*. During an election campaign visit to Ladakh in 1996, after the end of president's rule in Kashmir, they had stayed in a government guest house near the river in Choglamsar and had "discovered" that "it was our Sindhu *Ma*, the same Sindhu which is our identity [...] from which we derive Hindu-Hindustani-India," as the Sindhu Darshan information materials proclaim.³⁵ The idea for a *yatra* was developed with the assistance of then BJP president L.K. Advani, Indresh Kumar and other RSS leaders. The first Sindhu Darshan did not have any central government participation, but Advani, Jammu and Kashmir Chief

35. Quotes from Tarun Vijay (1997), "Mother Sindhu, We Have Not Forgotten You!" (<http://delhi.vsnl.net.in/sindhu/tv-leh.htm>), downloaded 28 May 2002. There is a historical precedent for the insight that the Indus flows through Ladakh. Karan Singh, son of the last Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir, wrote in his autobiography about his trip to Leh and Kargil with Nehru and Indira in 1949: "From Leh we flew to Kargil, the second town in Ladakh and the center of the area inhabited by Shia Muslims. The Ceasefire Line passed very close to Kargil, and the army was more in evidence. The brigade headquarters where we stayed were situated on the banks of the Indus. It struck me as curious that although the very name of our country and its predominant religion are derived from the Indus, the only place where this great river now flows through Indian territory is Ladakh." Karan Singh, *Heir Apparent: An Autobiography* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), 140. Actually, the *Yuvraj* was mistaken: Kargil lies on the banks of the river Suru, a tributary of the Indus.

Minister Farooq Abdullah and Ladakh Hill Council Chief Executive Councillor Thupstan Chhewang attended, together with several other national and local dignitaries and a handful of ordinary *yatris*. The event received some coverage in the national media, but not much notice was taken, despite the fact that the organizers tried to pitch it as part of the celebrations marking fifty years of independence.

The breakthrough for the Sindhu Darshan Abhiyan came in 1999 with the rise to power of the BJP and especially because of the Kargil conflict, the incursions across the Line of Control in Ladakh that triggered fierce clashes between India and Pakistan. Sindhu Darshan took place after the end of hostilities and became an orgy of nationalist fervor. A stamp was even issued to commemorate Sindhu Darshan, showing a drawing of the Indus in the Ladakhi landscape with an impression of the *vrishabha* and accompanied by a saying from the Rig Veda.³⁶ By the next year, responsibility for the organization had been taken over by the central government and the prime minister himself attended, further cementing the event as a national one. Pitched as a “celebration of national unity and communal harmony” and “a movement to honour brave jawans,” Sindhu Darshan is now held annually on June 1–3, and the Department of Tourism promotes the event through its website and special brochure, while government-owned Ashok Travels offers package tours.³⁷ In 2002 the proceedings were broadcast live on Doordarshan and forty-five non-resident Indians from twelve different countries were reported to have participated and to have donated money for the construction of a sprawling Sindhu Cultural Center near Leh.³⁸

The general public in Leh is at best skeptical of the Sindhu Darshan Abhiyan. In the early years, the event took place largely in

36. The secretary of the Philatelic Association was quoted as saying: “The multi-theme stamp is of interest to varied categories of collectors. The seal will interest archaeologists, it will hold appeal for students of geography or collectors of landscapes for the gorgeous Ladakhi landscape, river, mountains. The saying from the Rig Veda has added appeal.” Sushma Chadha, “Philately,” *The Financial Express*, 15 August 1999, web edition.

37. The official India tourism website for Sindhu Darshan is www.sindhudarshanindia.com. The earlier RSS sites are www.sindudarshan.com and delhi/vsnl.net.in/sindhu. In 2001, Sindhu Darshan got a counterpart in the northeast of the country with the first Brahmaputra Darshan, held in Arunachal Pradesh. Brahmaputra Darshan is organized and promoted by the district administration of East Siang. See <http://www.esiang.com/bdarshan.htm>.

38. See PTI reports, 1–3 June 2002.

isolation from the local society and economy, as yatris were given accommodation and food by the army and spent hardly a single paisa locally. In 1999, tremendous animosity was caused by the requisitioning of seats for the yatris on Indian Airlines flights out of Leh after flights had been canceled for a week due to bad weather, leaving large numbers of locals stranded.³⁹ Some conservative Buddhists object to the construction of the *ghat* at Shey Manla, close to a site with ancient Buddhist rock carvings and practically next door to the Dalai Lama's summer residence (and opposite the new masjid of Chushot on the other side of the river). Expansion plans of the Sindhu Darshan organization are viewed with suspicion, particularly as Tarun Vijay and LAHDC Chief Executive Councillor Thupstan Chhewang in 2002 flew by helicopter to visit a cave in the mountains south of Leh, where a natural *Shivlingam* is found. There is some concern among the local population that this process of discovery and appropriation of pilgrimage sites will turn Ladakh into another Lahul—a Buddhist region where the local religion is gradually marginalized by Hinduism and where locals have adopted Hindu names in addition to their Buddhist ones.⁴⁰ The actual proceedings of Sindhu Darshan attract few locals other than political and community leaders and those who have to perform in the cultural and religious program; even concerts by famous musicians on Leh's pologround do not bring out the crowds. The ritual of Sindhu Darshan, a puja on the banks of the river, has no parallel in local Buddhist tradition, and the speeches of politicians do not hold much attraction. Despite the relatively good

39. See also the report by Praveen Swami, "The Other Victims of Kargil," *Frontline* 16, no. 1 (3–16 July 1999), web edition.

40. The site is in fact visited from time to time by local Buddhists. The "conversion" of religious sites is not a new phenomenon, of course. Recent examples include the establishment of *pattar sahib* gurdwara near Leh, where an impression believed to have been left on a rock by sixth-century saint Padmasambhava, commonly referred to as Guru Rinpoche by Tibetan Buddhists, was recognized by the Sikh community as an impression of Guru Nanakji. The site was converted with permission from Bakula Rinpoche. See David L. Snellgrove and Taddeusz Skorupski, *The Cultural Heritage of Ladakh, Vol. 2: Zangskar and the Cave Temples of Ladakh* (Delhi: Vikas Publishers, 1980), 76–77. In 2001, the Sikhs purchased a sacred tree just behind the mosque in Leh, fencing it in and proclaiming the tree to have sprouted from the toothpick dropped on this spot by Guru Nanak, who is identified on a sign here as "Guru Nanak Rinpoche Lamaji." The tree had been owned by one of Leh's most prominent Buddhist families.

accessibility of the site in Shey, only a few hundred locals bother to attend.⁴¹

Politicians and tourism operators—and more than a few people are both—see Sindhu Darshan as a great instrument for promotion of Ladakhi interests and of Ladakh as a tourist destination. Numbers of domestic tourists visiting Ladakh had dropped dramatically as a result of the civil war in Kashmir and the agitation for Union Territory in Ladakh. The Kargil war and Sindhu Darshan gave a tremendous amount of national television coverage to Ladakh, and numbers of domestic tourists have more than doubled since 1999.⁴² As a Ladakhi tourism operator put it, “Indians will never come unless there is also some religious attraction here.” Politically, too, Sindhu Darshan is regarded as a boon. The *Daily Excelsior* newspaper from Jammu wrote—somewhat clumsily but accurately—in an editorial, “never before there has been so much convergence of Indian polity in Leh during the Sindhu Darshan or on any other occasion.”⁴³

The annual Sindhu Darshan constitutes an important opportunity for Ladakhi political leaders to bring their grievances and demands to the attention of national political leaders and media. In 2002, a joint Ladakhi statement in support of Sindhu Darshan was published, signed among others by representatives of the Shia, Sunni, Hindu, Sikh and Christian communities, the merchants’ and travel agent associations, as well as the presidents of the local branches of the Indian National Congress, the National Conference, and the BJP.⁴⁴ In the statement, the “enthusiastic participation in the festival by the people of Ladakh” was noted together with the “deep seethed [sic] patriotism inherent in each Ladakhi who have proudly sacrificed their many sons in the defence of the nation.” These official expressions

41. The disdain of locals for Sindhu Darshan was graphically expressed by the Ladakhi dance group that performed in 2001. Immediately after their performance they left the grounds and went home, while the other performers, from Arunachal, Himachal Pradesh, and Kashmir, remained and eagerly availed themselves of the photo opportunity with Advani, Farooq Abdullah and other dignitaries at the conclusion of the festivities. Shots with famous Bollywood actor Amrish Puri appeared to be most sought after.

42. The organization itself claims a four-fold increase, but this is based on the unusually low number of domestic tourists that visited the region in 1999.

43. “Editorial,” *Daily Excelsior*, 9 June 2000, web edition.

44. The statement was printed, published, and distributed in press kits by the Department of Tourism, Ministry of Tourism & Culture, Government of India, and included the names, organizations, titles, and telephone numbers of the signatories.

of enthusiasm, however, are often qualified considerably in private conversations, when not only Muslim but also Buddhist leaders express concerns. Despite the official de-saffronization of Sindhu Darshan through the emphasis on national unity, communal amity, and the promotion of Ladakh as a tourist destination, its RSS antecedents and Hindu-Hindustan-Hindutva character remain uncomfortable for Buddhist and Muslim Ladakhis alike.

Serving the People

SINDHU DARSHAN WAS BUT ONE, albeit very high-profile, dimension of the RSS strategy to establish a stronger presence for itself in Ladakh. Little known to large sections of the general public in Ladakh, a second important initiative has been the establishment of a local non-governmental organization called the Ladakh Kalyan Sangh in Hindi and Ladags Pandey Tshogspa in Ladakhi. This organization, formally started in 1995, though not really active until 1997, is a “classical” RSS outfit dedicated to “*seva ... sanskar ... ekta*,” as one of its brochures states.⁴⁵ The Ladakh Kalyan Sangh is staffed by three young volunteers in Leh: two Ladakhis (one of whom is a monk) and a young man from Manali, who has been in charge since March 2002. The parent organizations of the LKS are Vidya Bharati and Seva Bharati, and operations in Leh are overseen from Jammu. Its main activity is social work and education, especially targeting children from poor families.

In addition to sewing and typing classes, the Pandey Tshogspa has thus far established thirteen *sanskar kendra* or “coaching centers,” including two in Shergol Block of Kargil district, the “frontline” between Buddhist and Muslim majority regions. In the coaching centers, children are provided some instruction in academic subjects; “moral education,” cultural activities, daily prayers and physical education are also part of the curriculum. Each coaching center has one teacher, who attends an initial three-day workshop at the organization’s offices in Leh, while by the summer of 2002 seven teachers had been sent for six-month teacher training courses in Delhi. The LKS also engages in what it refers to as “student development,” and has

45. Like the early Sindhu Darshan Abhiyan, it too appropriated the logo of the fifty years celebrations, printed on its official information material.

recruited sixty-five students from villages throughout Ladakh—apparently including some Muslims—who have been sent to hostels in Delhi, Haryana, Punjab and Himachal Pradesh run by Vidya Bharati. In addition to its village-based education activities, the LKS has also organized seminars in Leh, including one on “The Role of Vedic Religion and Buddhism for the Unity of the Country,” or “Hindutva” as a Sangh volunteer pointed out helpfully. In these seminars, local scholars as well as local political leaders have participated.

As the leader of the LKS confided, having explained the organization’s structure and its activities, “this organization is really run by the RSS. We are here to stop the Muslims.” According to him, Ladakh is a high-priority area for the national organization and “we get anything we ask for.” In addition to imparting education in academic subjects and “hindutva,” he said the organization tried to support Ladakhi Buddhists living in or close to Muslim majority areas. Hinduism and Buddhism, my interlocutor explained, were the same religion really, although he admitted to some difficulty in convincing some local people about this. “But we are making progress.” The presence of posters of the Ayatollah Khomeini and other Shi’ite clerics in Kargil, he said, showed that it was impossible to trust “these people,” and this had been confirmed by the “Turtok incident” in 1999. At the time, twenty-four local Muslim youths had been arrested after illegal weapons had been discovered in the village, which is right near the Line of Control and had been part of Pakistan until 1974.⁴⁶ He added that the Khomeini Memorial Trust in Kargil recruited Muslim youths and took them away. “I suspect they take them to madrassas,” he added.

Education is a major concern for parents in Ladakh, particularly as the performance of government schools is abysmally poor—more than 90 percent of students fail the matriculation exam that gives

46. In fact, all the accused were acquitted in 2001. The case against them turned out to be fabricated by the police and fell apart in the Sessions Court. The men had, however, spent two years in the Leh Central Jail, apparently killing time playing volleyball. Upon their release, they participated in and won a local tournament, beating all competitors with ease. The real culprit(s) who had brought in weapons were never identified. Those arrested were mostly people who had actually led the police to the arms cache. While the original case received a lot of coverage in the national media and was exploited to the fullest by the LBA and others, the acquittals were not even announced on local radio. Two of the accused had been police officers and were reinstated after their release from jail.

access to higher education. The only alternative, private school, is beyond the means of many rural families. Any organization that offers free coaching or education in boarding schools in India or Leh is likely to find many takers in Ladakh—some evangelist Christian mission schools recruit students in Ladakh today, the backlash of 1988 apparently forgotten. So far, few people appear concerned over the activities of the LKS/RSS in Ladakh. A Muslim leader told me that the RSS would not affect his community much, but he did expect that they would have a major impact on the Buddhists, because, as he put it, “they have a weak conception of religion.” According to him, the RSS “will change the mindset of the Buddhists.”

Dangerous Liaisons: Toward Brotherhood in Saffron?

AS EXEMPLIFIED by the Sindhu Darshan Abhiyan and the Ladakh Kalyan Sangh, Hindu nationalists have taken a greater interest and adopted a more active role in Ladakh, especially since the Kargil war. As already pointed out by Wirsing, Kashmir has succeeded Ayodhya as an attractive cause for the sangh parivar, allowing it to pursue a Hindu nationalist agenda in the name of national unity and patriotism.⁴⁷ The Akhil Bharati Vidhyarti Parishad’s march on Lal Chowk and Murli Manohar Joshi’s *Ekta yatra* sought to do just that already in the early 1990s. Most significantly, and in a clear departure from the past, the LBA now openly and actively associates itself with the VHP, RSS, and Panun Kashmir, not merely accepting their expressions of support, but actually joining a common platform with them for trifurcation—or quadrifurcation, really, if one includes the demand for Panun Kashmir. The question is how we should understand this move, and what its consequences might be for a peaceful and durable settlement of Ladakhi demands, which in turn must be part of any settlement of the Kashmir issue as a whole.

There are several ways in which the saffronization of the LBA might be interpreted. First, it is clear that the LBA is seeking to put pressure on the central government. During the 1989 agitation, with the Congress in power, it could do so quite simply by adopting simultaneously the language of patriotism and communalism. The eruption

47. Wirsing, *India, Pakistan, and the Kashmir Dispute*, 165 ff.

of armed struggle in the valley allowed the LBA to stress the Buddhists' patriotic credentials while simultaneously denouncing the Kashmiris and by extension Muslims in Ladakh as secessionists who could not be trusted. The LBA could maintain that it was not communal, but that "Ladakh's unique identity"—Buddhist, to be sure—was threatened by these others, who were "real" communalists. Playing the national media and politicians with great skill, Leh quickly managed to obtain significant concessions, although realization of the Hill Council would take another six years of struggle. In 1989, with the Congress on the defensive and in need of relative stability in Ladakh—if only to be able to maintain that the Kashmir problem was limited to the valley—the BJP could be used by traditional Congress stronghold Leh to put pressure on the Center. With the BJP at the helm at the Center, pressure has to be exerted in a different way. On the one hand, until August 2002, the Ladakh Hill Development Council was firmly controlled by the Congress party, although the Lok Sabha seat for Ladakh remains in the hands of Hassan Khan, a Kargili member of the National Conference—a National Democratic Alliance (NDA) partner. The district Congress organization had remained officially secular, seeking to use the national Congress to exert pressure on the NDA, while the LBA—once dubbed a Congress front organization by the NC—can follow a harder "Hindutva" line. Given the Ladakhi Buddhist leadership's track record in political strategy, it is quite possible that the hardening of the LBA's communal stance should be seen as "merely" strategic, as part of a two-pronged approach—a kind of political good cop/bad cop routine.

There continue to be warm relationships between the LBA and other Buddhist politicians.⁴⁸ So far no Buddhist leader has publicly questioned the LBA's alliance with Panun Kashmir, RSS and VHP, although LUTF leaders have insisted that their own campaign for trifurcation has a non-communal basis. And while the current LBA president repeatedly has denied the possibility of the imposition of another social boycott on the Muslim community in Ladakh, his rhetoric has become more saffronized, and he does not hesitate to speak disparagingly of a "fashion of secularism." During the Kargil

48. It is worth noting that the LBA president, Tsering Samphel, is a former MLA and district president of the Congress. He has been in the forefront of the fight for autonomy since the 1960s.

conflict, the LBA Youth Wing demanded that refugees from Kargil be sent back, as they could not be trusted. In July 1999, the Congress president made some remarks about the Quran that were regarded as blasphemous by the Muslim community, and a few days later three monks were shot dead by Kashmiri militants at a roadblock at Rangdum. According to the LBA, this was a “retaliatory killing” and an attempt of the militants to spread unrest to Ladakh, although indications suggest that it was probably an unfortunate coincidence, rather than a pre-planned attack, which led to the murders.⁴⁹

Ever since the Kargil conflict, the LBA has repeatedly denounced the government’s “pampering” of Muslims. The army, funded by the central government, began a series of initiatives under the “Operation Sadbhavna” scheme, including the provision of free transport and the establishment of schools and vocational training centers. Initially, these initiatives were targeting villages along the Line of Control. Upon vociferous protests from the LBA, the program was expanded to central Ladakh and the Tibetan border areas as well.⁵⁰ And while more than 2,500 Ladakhi Buddhists were recruited into the expanding Ladakh Scouts regiment and paramilitary units, the LBA nonetheless saw reason to complain because of the discontinuation of the Special Security Bureau program training Buddhist villagers in the use of weapons—a program initiated in the wake of the Sino-Indian war of 1962. According to the LBA, the discontinuation was due to Muslim complaints that only Buddhists were given training and weapons. A final example of the continued concerns expressed by the LBA over Muslim advancement involves the census of 2001, the first since 1981 to have been carried out in Ladakh. The new census results are said to show that the lead of the Buddhist community over the Muslims has shrunk further.⁵¹ The LBA’s fear of being outnumbered by Muslims is an old one, as mentioned earlier. To counter the threat, the LBA actively campaigns against birth control measures (officially for

49. Rangdum has been the scene of a long-running dispute between Bakarwals and locals, who accuse the shepherds of encroaching and stealing fodder. The roadblock was put up to check trucks for fodder. When the militants’ truck was stopped, they apparently panicked, shooting the monks manning the barrier.

50. Since the transfer of General Ray earlier in 2002, the scheme is said to be rapidly unravelling, exactly as Kargili activists and politicians had feared it would.

51. I have not yet seen the census figures broken down according to religion. The official census web site, www.censusindia.org, does not yet provide these tables.

violating Buddhist precepts regarding the sanctity of life). The fact that the voters' list in Kargil has more people on it than that of Leh, despite the latter's slightly larger population, is taken as further evidence of Muslim manipulations aimed at dominating the Buddhists. Perhaps the LBA president has indeed become more communalist, but undoubtedly such complaints and the representation of Turtok as "evidence" of the Muslim community's treachery and of Rangdum as simply a communal attack must also be seen as part of the normal representational strategies in Indian politics.⁵²

New Directions?

IN AUGUST 2002, a new strategy was adopted by the Buddhist political establishment in Leh. An announcement was made that all district units of political parties, including the Congress, National Conference, and BJP, were disbanded. Buddhist ministers in the state government, Rajya Sabha member Thikse Rinpoche, and the two MLAs for Leh district all announced their resignation from their respective political parties. Simultaneously, the formation of a Ladakh Union Territory Front (LUTF) was announced that would field candidates for the upcoming Assembly elections. The formation of a regional party had been a long-standing wish of some members of the Buddhist political establishment, but had never been achieved previously, partly due to deep rifts within the Buddhist community. Muslim leaders of Leh had not been taken into confidence about the formation of a regional party, but were invited to join the movement. Although stressing that there was no unequivocal agreement with the demand for Union Territory, representatives of the Shi'ites and Sunnis within days announced that they would support the LUTF and would not field other candidates, so as not to jeopardize communal amity in the region. Both the LUTF candidates, Rigzin Jora and Sonam (Pinto) Norbu, could thus be declared elected unopposed. The assembly elections led to the demise of the National Conference regime, and on November 1, 2002, a new coalition government of People's Democratic Party and Congress (I) was sworn in, headed by

⁵². For elaboration on this reading of Indian political discourse, see van Beek, "Beyond Identity Fetishism."

former Congress stalwart Mufti Mohammed Sayeed. Great care was taken to create a coalition that could be seen also to represent the interests of the Jammu and Ladakh regions. The independent MLA for Kargil, Haji Nissar Ali, and LUTF MLA for Leh Rigzin Jora were given positions as ministers of state in the new government.⁵³ In Leh, the gesture from the Muslim leadership not to field a candidate in the elections was reciprocated soon after by the appointment of Muslim Executive Councillor Ghulam Abbas Abidi.⁵⁴ Kargil's KMT, meanwhile, announced that it will not support Union Territory, but will push for the creation of a Hill Council for Kargil and a common regional council for Ladakh.

These recent—and at the time of writing still unfolding—developments suggest that a hard-line “Hindutva” strategy is less likely to be pursued by the political leadership in Leh at this time, although it is quite possible that the LBA will continue to rattle its sabers to keep the pressure on the state and central government. The new government appears to have the establishment of regional councils high on its agenda, and it is not unthinkable that genuine devolution of power to Ladakh may go some way in assuaging radical Buddhist elements, although the experiences with the LAHDC under Farooq Abdullah's regime have given rise to doubts about the feasibility of “genuine autonomy.” Not surprisingly, VHP and RSS leaders in Jammu have expressed their unhappiness with the new coalition, no doubt in part because its explicit attention to regional representation in the coalition and to regional imbalances in its proposed program of action takes much of the wind out of the sails of the sangh parivar. At the same time, settling regional demands without resorting to communal arithmetic may pose a formidable challenge.

Today, there are radical elements with strong communalist outlooks in Kargil as well as Leh, among Buddhists as well as Muslims.

53. The choice of these two candidates by the Buddhist leadership suggests a conscious attempt to balance political and communal interests. Pinto Norbu is a long-time National Conference member who commands considerable respect among the Muslims of Leh. Rigzin Jora is a former Congress man, who most recently served as LAHDC executive councillor, and previously as general secretary of the LBA. He was one of the key leaders of the 1989 agitation.

54. According to the LAHDC Act, one of the executive councillors must be a member of the “principal minority” (i.e., a Muslim), but this had not been honored since the elections for the second LAHDC in 2001. See the report by Tashi Morup in *Kashmir Times*, 20 October 2002, web edition.

However, there is little sign as yet that the overtures from the sangh parivar to Buddhists in Leh have more than strictly instrumental appeal. The identification of Buddhism as “identical” with Hinduism, or as a mere subset of Hinduism, goes directly against the “Buddhist pride” agenda promoted by the LBA and the Ladakh Gonpa Association—the organization representing the interests of the monastic establishment. The LBA’s religious agenda is aimed at promoting a revitalization of Buddhism through instruction of the general population in the basic teachings of the Buddha, bringing the religion back among the people rather than leaving it up to monks. At the same time, several monasteries have embarked on recruitment drives—Thikse Rinpoche going as far as to demand a child from each family affiliated with his monastery. While this shows that the main Buddhist institutions do not share the same views about which way Buddhism should develop, amalgamation with Hinduism is obviously not a serious option. Thus, while the LBA and some Buddhist political leaders may be willing to share a platform with the sangh parivar to promote their agenda for Union Territory status, Hindutva as such would not appear to have much appeal in a region like Ladakh. Yet despite this limited appeal of Hindutva, the saffronization of education, of the media, and of public life in general are likely to strengthen even further the perceived validity and necessity of communal idioms. It is here, perhaps more than in any other sphere, that the long-term dangers of the liaison with Hindu nationalist organizations lie: the poisoning of relations between Buddhists and Muslims in Ladakh, further weakening the opportunities for a united, autonomous Ladakh. Given the economic and geographical interdependencies between the two regions, but also in view of their shared history and culture, such a permanent rift would be a tragedy for all concerned.⁵⁵

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