



Research Paper

## Social Exclusion in Leh District of Union Territory of Ladakh: Deviation from the Buddhist Doctrine

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### ABSTRACT

Behind the tranquillity of this immaculate panorama, under the Buddhist shroud of equality, breeds the vile contamination of a segregative caste system which threatens the very foundation of the religion that boasts of following in the footsteps of their enlightened master who spent his ascetic life propagating the principle of non-discrimination among life forms. Caste system crept into the Buddhist society of the Leh region and polluted the doctrine of Buddha that had once reached this land through the efforts of devout emperors like Ashoka and Kanishka. The ones belonging to the lowest strata, labelled untouchables, experienced social exclusion. The purpose of the present paper is to unveil the origin of this caste system and expose the jaundiced stratification of the Leh society in union territory of Ladakh.

**KEYWORDS:** Buddhist, Leh Ladakh, Social exclusion

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Among the many caste centred counter hierarchical movements Buddhism is perhaps one of the earliest manifestations of anti-caste and anti-untouchability uprising in India. In the 6th century BCE Buddhism arose within a well-established religious milieu dominated by Brahmanism controlled by priests of the Brahmin caste and besides being a reason based reformative religious order, was a crusade against caste prejudices including untouchability.<sup>1</sup> Buddhism's greatest appeal lay in its social teaching. Its emphasis on the basic equality of all humans was strikingly new. Tribal cultures which showed greater regard for egalitarianism responded more eagerly to Buddhist teaching. Buddha vehemently criticised and condemned Vedic literature which preached caste system and human exploitation in the name of divinely order of Varna system.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, the Buddha seemed to be the only God who took birth as an untouchable. The Buddhist text, *Jataka*, is replete with tales of previous births of Buddha where he is an untouchable.<sup>3</sup> In *Matanga Jataka*, Lord Buddha takes birth as a Chandala's son, Matanga.<sup>4</sup> The Buddha himself not only preached about humanity towards the "lower classes", but also ordained disciples from the Untouchable caste such as Upali – a barber, Sunita – a scavenger, Punna and Punnika – slave girls.<sup>5</sup> He preached that all people had the potential for Buddhahood within themselves, and for this, deserved equal respect. The protestant character was applauded and people converted to Buddhism to escape untouchability. B.R.Ambedkar<sup>6</sup> asserts, "The first social reformer and the greatest of them all is Gautama Buddha. Any history of social reform must begin with him and no history of social reform in India will be complete which omits to take account of his great achievements." The Buddha rejected the system of hereditary caste. A man's position in society, he maintained, is determined not by birth but by worth, by conduct and by character rather than by descent. Brahmanical pretensions to hereditary holiness were therefore dismissed with ridicule and membership of the Buddhist community, whether as monks or lay devotees, was thrown open to all who took refuge in the three jewels and were prepared to observe the Shila appropriate to their vocation.<sup>7</sup> Not only could members of all the four varnas join the Samgha and become monks, but even untouchables like the Chandalas and the Pukkusas could achieve nirvana.<sup>8</sup> In his Order of Monks all castes united as do the rivers in the sea.<sup>9</sup> Romila Thapar sums up nicely, "Buddhism was very liberal and accommodating. It did not believe in caste system or in the supremacy of the priestly class. It treated all men as equal recognising dignity of man as man. Caste according to Buddha was no obstacle to the highest truth. By abolishing caste distinctions and introducing democratic principles Buddha raised the status of the lower caste people, the degraded ones."<sup>10</sup> The credit of propagating Buddhism to Ladakh<sup>11</sup>, like to the rest of India, goes to Ashoka. Mahavamsa<sup>12</sup> informs us that at the conclusion of the Third Buddhist Council, Buddhist monks of some repute were selected and sent as missionaries to various regions. Amongst them was Majjhantika who was sent to Kashmir and Gandhara. The

impetus which Ashoka's imperial propaganda had given to Buddhism was continued by Kanishka, during whose rule the momentous Fourth council of Buddhist congregation was held in the Kundalavana Vihara in Kashmir, probably under the presidency of the Great Buddhist theologian Vasumitra. Hiuan Tsang tells us that the convocation of 500 Buddhist elders was the direct outcome of the great interest which was taken by the foreign monarch in the Buddhist scriptures.<sup>13</sup> He further informs that Kanishka had this extensive literature engraved on copper plates, enclosed in stone coffers and deposited in a stupa specially built for the purpose.<sup>14</sup> The Sakyamuni's message of equality spread across Ladakh through the efforts of royal patrons and the zeal of pious missionaries with more and more people embracing Buddhism during the subsequent centuries. Buddhism became dominant in Leh, one of the two districts in the Union Territory of Ladakh, to such an extent that the societal laws mirrored the Buddhist doctrine. One would suppose that Leh, like many other Buddhist dominated regions, wouldn't practice any form of social exclusion. Well, sadly, Leh is an exception. If we dissect the Leh Buddhist culture a bit further there exists certain practices which are neither culturally appropriate and religiously relevant nor legally legitimate for behind the tranquillity of this immaculate panorama, under the Buddhist shroud of equality, breeds the vile contamination of a segregative caste system. The Leh Buddhist society is divided into three principal classes viz. upper, middle and lower.<sup>15</sup> Rigzong is the upper class comprising Gyalpo (king), Kushak (head lama), Klon (ministers) and Lonpo (bureaucrats, chief army officer and governors). Mangrik is the middle class which includes Lama (priest), Unpos (astrologers), Larje (physician) and the common man. Rignun is the lower class of Bedas (nomad musicians), Mons (musicians), Garas (blacksmiths), Shinkhans (carpenters) and Lamkhans (cobblers) etc. An astonishing feature of the social system, a feature which should have no place among the people who profess to be the followers of the Buddha, is the observance of diluted form of untouchability which the Lord denounced by precept and example in no ambiguous terms. The sections of society who form the victims of this irrational and uncharitable discrimination go by the name of Beda, Mona and Gara. The other sections of society do not interdine and intermarry with them so that they have virtually the same status as the untouchables had in Hindu society in India. The caste system of Ladakh is probably one of the most ill understood and neglected entities. The presence of hierarchy in the social ranking was the initial face of casteism in Leh. In a society dominated by a casteless religion, such social constructs often leave one befuddled with questions. An interaction with the elderly here unveils the genesis of the caste system in Leh. The caste system is nothing but the division of labour that was established by the King in ancient times. This was done in order to run the administration efficiently. People from the community who were given the task of painting were recognized by the surname of that of a painter. Similarly, people who looked after the livestock were given the surname of a shepherd. Identity was solely a matter of occupation chosen by people or given to them by the rulers. The title of Smith Garba, was given to the communities who would make tools while the drum players (Daman) were as Baeda. The caste system gained rigidity with time and even the royals succumbed under the societal pressure. King Tsewang Namgyal II (1780-1810) fell in love with a low caste Beda girl and married her.<sup>16</sup> The Ladakhis were unhappy and did not accept the queen from a lower caste. So, the king under public pressure, sent back the queen and married Kunzang Wangmo, a princess from Purig, who bore him two sons. Just as the mlecchas failed to gain equal footing with the indigenous population of Aryavarta, the Tibetan refugees who are Buddhists and have lately been colonized some 9 kilometres away from Leh on LehDungti road and a few families living near Spituk Village, are socially excluded by the Ladakhis. Considering the Tibetans socially low the Ladakhis do not marry them.

The Ladakhis are endogamous and as soon as a female marries outside the group, her affiliation to the group is ceased. If she, for instance, makes a marital union with Gara she is treated, for all purposes, as a member of Gara group. At village gatherings or ceremonies, people considered to be low caste have separate cups and glasses for drinking local beer (Chang) or tea. They are not allowed to eat or drink from the utensils of others as they fear that they would pollute them. When the rigsngan (the three lower castes) are invited to a festival or a gathering they are made to sit at the end of a special seating order called the gral. The gral is a seating order that dictates where people sit by age, rank, and caste. Nowhere is the issue of caste seen more prominently than in the gral. They are not provided a mat to sit on, they have to bring their own dining ware, and the higher castes won't eat the food they bring. The lower caste people are forbidden from becoming the head of the village (Goba) and head of the monastery (Lobon) irrespective of their proficiency, due to their caste identity. Atrocities against them basically arise in the context of 'keeping them' in their place within the social hierarchy, mediated by caste and untouchability. In certain villages the houses of the low caste are segregated from the rest of the village. Despite the unacceptability of such discrimination in our Constitution, which provided guarantee of "Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth" under Article 15 of the Constitution of India and "Abolition of untouchability" under Article 17, the abhorrent practice continues alienating, ignoring and discriminating the people who are practicing the same religion. Buddhism being a "casteless" religion has attracted Dalits and scheduled castes for the conversion of their religion and every year people have been converting into Buddhism intentionally or unintentionally. For some it's more suitable for their spiritual growth but for some it's an opportunity to change their caste's status quo. In

Leh, the practice is reversed. Due to all these discriminatory acts a large number of Garba people has decided to come out of the cocoon of discrimination and decided to accept Islam which has stirred the consciousness of the main Buddhist community. Recently, amidst protests and shutdowns the situation is tense in the Zaskar valley, and there is a visible tension between the Muslim and Buddhist community over this issue. With the advancement of modernity, the people belonging to Garba, Mon and Beda are also changing their profession. Many of them are no more practicing their traditional occupation due to lack of dignity for their occupation and harsh discrimination by the people, thus, affecting the harvest, the music, the dance, the economic progress and the livelihood in Leh. Ladakh is known as land of lamas, each village having monastery treasured with statues and thankas, but it has miles to go to lead a true Buddhist life. The discrimination and untouchability are practiced by the people who profess to be Buddhist but practice against the fundamental principles of the Buddhism. A few years back, HH Dalai Lama shook the consciousness of prejudiced Ladakhi by blessing, hugging and playing the musical instruments (Dhaman). His holiness, by playing the traditional drum (Dhaman), openly demonstrated that he, as well as Buddhism, condemns the caste system practiced by segments of Ladakhi Buddhists. It is time for the people of Ladakh to introspect and think on these lines. The so-called 'socially exclusive lower castes' should be brought in the mainstream, given equal opportunity and be treated as equals, for there is no bigger religion than humanity.

### Notes & References

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<sup>1</sup> Sang Mitra R.C. *Dalit Identity in the New Millennium: Dalit leaders*: 2003, Commonwealths publisher, p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>3</sup> Vundru, R.S, *Buddha as Untouchable*, countercurrents.org, 2006

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>5</sup> Sharma, S.K., *Life, Profile & Biography of Buddha*, Diamond Pocket Books, Delhi, 2002, p. 99

<sup>6</sup> Ambedkar, B.R., *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 3, Government of Maharashtra, Bombay, 1987, p. 165

<sup>7</sup> Sangharakshita B., *Buddhism, in A Cultural History of India* ed. by Basham, A.L., Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1997, p. 98

<sup>8</sup> Jha, D.N., *Ancient India: In Historical Outline*, Manohar Pub., New Delhi, 2008, p. 75

<sup>9</sup> Just as, O monks, the great rivers Ganga, Yamuna, Aciravati, Sarabhu, and Mahi, on reaching the ocean, lose their earlier name and identity and come to be reckoned as the great ocean, similarly, O monks, people of the four castes (varnas)... who leave the household and become homeless recluses under the Doctrine and Discipline declared by the Tathāgata, lose their previous names and identities and are reckoned as recluses who are sons of Sākya" (vide *Udāna* 55)

<sup>10</sup> Thapar, R., *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1997, p. 141

<sup>11</sup> The origin of Buddhism in Kashmir is shrouded in obscurity. Buddhist sources, however, are unanimous in attributing the introduction of Buddhism in Kashmir to Majjhantika, a monk of Varanasi and a disciple of Ananda. Kalhana describes the establishment of several viharas in Kashmir during the reign of King Surendra, the predecessor of Ashoka. Kalhana states in the *Rajatarangini* that Srinagara was built by Ashoka. According to Ceylonese Chronicle, the Mahavamsa, Moggaliputta Tissa, the spiritual guide of King Ashoka, after the conclusion of the third Buddhist Council, sent missionaries to different countries to propagate Buddhism. The Buddhist savant Majjhantika was deputed to Kashmir Gandhara. The story of the introduction of Buddhism in Kashmir by Majjhantika is also told in several other Buddhist texts like the Ashokavadana, the Avadanakalpalata, the travel account left by Yuan Chwang and the Tibetan Dulva (vinaya). Jalauka, a Shaivite, tainted with the destruction of a vihara possibly built by his father, however, Jalauka created a big vihara, the Kritiyashramavihara, in the vicinity of Varahamula (Baramulla). (vide *Kalhana's Rajatarangini* trans. by M.A. Stein, Vol. 1)

<sup>12</sup> *Mahavamsa*, XII, 18.

<sup>13</sup> Beal, S., *Si-Yu-Ki: Buddhist Records of the Western World*, Vol. 1, Trubner and Co., Ludgate Hill, London, 1884, pp. 151-155. The first glimpse of political history is found in the Kharosthi inscription of "Uvima Kavthisa" discovered near the K'a-la-rtse (Khalatse) bridge on the Indus, showing that in around the 1st century, Ladakh was a part of the Kushan Empire. A few other short Brahmi and Kharosthi inscriptions have been found in Ladakh.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p. 156

<sup>15</sup> Mann, R.S., *Ladakh Then and Now: Cultural, Ecological, and Political*, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, 2002, p. 53

<sup>16</sup> Bhasin, S.K., *Amazing Land Ladakh: Places, People, and Culture*, Indus Publishing Company, New Delhi, 2006, p. 54