

## **Politics and Autonomy: Insights from the Ladakh region**

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*Abstract: This paper seeks to reflect on the complexities within the discourse of development and relating the same with the nature of state functioning in the Indian context. It seeks to elucidate on the inter-linkages that development has had with the other factors like politics, identity and the discourse of autonomy. It presents the argument of development and its association with the other political factors in the empirical case of Ladakh, explicating as to how the assertion of specific identities becomes a tool of achieving the universal goal of development which is reflected in the demand for political autonomy in order to address the imbalances in development patterns across regions. It seeks to look into aspects of legitimacy of the State of Jammu and Kashmir in its political relations with the Ladakh region and how the same were shaped keeping in context the trajectory of development of the Ladakh region. This is followed by the further strengthening of the Ladakhi identity to get their demands for development imbalances addressed. The genesis of the same being found in the nature of the State of Jammu and Kashmir and its homogeneous model of development uniformly implemented across the entire region which resulted in the further strengthening of the linkages between development and identity demonstrated in its assertion of greater regional autonomy.*

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### **Nature of the State and the politics of development**

The nature of the State and its pursuit in terms of meeting the developmental goals has been discussed and debated among various scholars in the academic world as to what kind of state would be the most effective in terms of meeting the development agenda and catering to the developmental goals of its populace. Development as a phenomenon is largely perceived as coming with the idea of modernity. Modernity is seen to be the larger idea that guides development across the world and therefore a correlation is largely drawn between the two, with the idea of development and modernity going together, which implies that development can only be realized through the idea of modernity and a developed nation must adhere to the principle ideas of modernity to be categorized as a developed nation.

As reflected in the work of Lwazi Siyabonga Lushaba in “Development as modernity, modernity as development”, it can be said that the schools of thought, the Marxian and the bourgeois theory advocated similar views on the idea of development and modernity, where it was believed that for the third world countries to develop, they must modernize as well. Wilmort Moore also upheld the view that the developing world should modernize by shifting from its pre modern society to social and technological transformation as existed in the advanced western world and thus follow the modernization paradigm of development of the west.

Taking this forward and viewing the same in the context of the Indian nation state, it can be asserted that a similar model of development which adhered to the western developed nations notions of development was adopted which largely perceived the various socio- cultural groups constituting the Indian nation under the same homogeneous category, thus overshadowing the peculiarities and the specificities of the Indian context. Here also, it can be said that the Indian nation was thus imagined and was a historical construct to bring the various socio cultural units together and fight against the British as one homogeneous entity. Eventually, following the post independence period, the idea of nationalism that pervaded the Indian society and the political arena was that of Nehru which was essentially modernist in nature. Through the differences and the pluralistic nature of the Indian society was recognized, however the quest was largely to portray India as one integrated whole. Therefore, inspired by the European model of the modern nation state, India to come in that category also had to ensure a cultural unification of its defined

territorial boundaries and the communities inhabiting the same. However, this led to the diversity within its national boundaries to be brushed under the carpet.

Thus, as asserted by Sudipto Kaviraj, conceptually the task of formation of the Indian nation was achieved, though in reality at the practical level, India was still forging towards building the Indian nation. This implied further, that the issue of ascriptive identities was not paid much heed to in terms of giving them an equal space in the political arena for asserting their group identity. The only identity which acquired primacy in the modern Indian nation state was that of the secular identity of the Indian citizen. Besides, the other group based ascriptive identities and granting them political space for assertion of their interests was largely perceived as antithetical to the collective interests of the Indian nation state. This ensured that the larger goal was envisioned in terms of protecting the sovereignty of the newly formed nation state which was still in a nascent stage of its making.

Therefore, the question of identity and mobilization based on it was perceived to be antithetical to the sovereignty of the Indian state and thus required to be contained. Owing to this nature of the modern Indian nation state, the development goals that it envisioned for the Indian society also followed the same trajectory of the modernist approach which viewed the diverse and pluralist Indian society from a single vantage point of being a homogeneous category requiring a similar model of development that could work across its territorial boundaries. Besides, the perceived apprehension that it carried with respect to the various identity groups and their assertion of demands, the model of development that was adopted was largely a centralized model of development.

Therefore, the liberal Indian state's recognition of one supreme, umbrella identity without paying adequate consideration to the other socio cultural identities and hence to accommodate them at a collective level, and the same being reflected in its top down approach to development, a more centralized structure of implementing the development goals resulted in a gradual discontent among various group based identities that had been simmering over the years. Therefore, the logic of the creation of the modern India being inspired by the model of the developed first world and the recognition of one supreme identity implied the creation of a strong centre which could ensure

India's development from top to bottom following a centralized structure of policy making and implementation.

Therefore, the fallacy of the development model adopted by the Indian state is further corroborated by the argument of Narayan,

“All plans of development have greater chances of success if the relevant cultural and social factors are integrated into planning.. social and cultural factors must be so presented that they are plainly appropriate to the problem at hand and are clearly useful to the makers of development decision ... (Narayan 1988:81)

It can be inferred from this argument that the idea of development planning to be successful needs to be contextualized capturing the socio cultural differences and specificities of the regions where development is to be registered. However, unfortunately, the model of development adopted in post independence era did not adequately represent these socio cultural facets of the Indian society besides following a more rational bureaucratic model of development for the various sub national units constituting the Indian state.

Therefore, owing to these two factors, the precedence of one identity overshadowing the others and the reluctance to accommodate their group based demands along with the bureaucratized model of development planning, resulted in the growing discontent amongst the various socio cultural identities which gradually started mobilizing themselves based on region, ethnicity, language etc. in order to find their space within the political arena of the Indian state which led to the emergence of various regional movements pitching their demands relating to recognition, representation and redistribution in order to address the skewed nature of development in their respective regions or of their socio cultural communities.

Therefore, the nature of the Indian state and its reflection into the development model adopted by it, resulted in the further politicization of these socio cultural groups claiming their share within the political system through various mechanisms of autonomy. Thus, identity became a major source through which social groups could be mobilized to seek more political leverage within the

political system in order to address the larger issue of development which is well exemplified in cases of Uttarakhand claimed political autonomy from U.P.; Jharkhand from Bihar; and recently Telangana from Andhra Pradesh. Therefore, owing to the above stated two factors which have guided India's development trajectory since independence, it can be said that this has been a reasons for the emergence of the politics of development encapsulating the approach of the state towards various sub regions with respect to development, the factors guiding the trajectory of development of various sub national units besides looking into the context of these regions and the further contestations between various social groups with respect to the development model.

A similar case can be seen within the State of Jammu and Kashmir with respect to the regional articulations of autonomy that have been demonstrated in case of Jammu and Ladakh sub regions of the State of Jammu and Kashmir. The case becomes even more complicated owing to the geo political complexities of the Kashmir valley and the preoccupation of the Indian state with the same.

Jammu and Kashmir presents a more complicated case when seen in terms of both the Kashmir valley and the inter- regional diversities existing within the State.

### **Jammu and Kashmir and the development trajectory of the Ladakh region**

Autonomy constitutes an integral part of the relation shared between the State of Jammu and Kashmir and the Indian state. Owing to this, the relation between the two is negotiated in the context of the autonomy given to Jammu and Kashmir under article 370. However, despite the continuous political engagement with the State of Jammu and Kashmir, the demands for further autonomy have not subsided. In fact, owing to the pluralistic nature of the State, there have been further demands for regional autonomy emanating from Jammu and Ladakh which have been time and again raised with the State government as well as with the Union government.

These demands are largely based on the kind of regional imbalances that exist within the State itself and the apathy and inadequacy with which the development funds and policies are implemented in the State as a whole. Here also, it can be said that while framing the policy by the liberal Indian state for the State of J&K, the region is taken as a collective entity, a homogeneous category in terms of the vertical distribution of the development funds. However,

the question of contestation comes in when the same gets horizontally distributed within the State as a whole. Here, the significance of the power dynamics operating within the State comes into play.

Jammu and Kashmir constitutes of three major regions, namely Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh each having its own diversity and socio cultural communities. Each region is diverse in terms of the topography, Historical trajectory as well as the communities inhabiting the same. This implies that the challenges faced by each region in terms of their development needs differ owing to the pluralistic nature of the population and the topography of each region. Besides, the political dynamics of each region also considerably vary. Therefore, here it becomes difficult to perceive the entire region in terms of one collective whole and thus requiring similar solution.

Therefore, in order to honor the development needs of each region in an appropriate manner, it is integral to take into account the socio cultural and political context of each region before the implementation of development plans for the State. However, owing to the urgency and the pertinence of the Kashmir issue, it is perceived that the relations between the Indian state and the State are largely negotiated through the gates of Kashmir whereas the other two major sub regions of Jammu and Ladakh assume political invisibility and marginalization both in terms of the political spaces within the State as well as with the central government. This feeling of injustice and marginalization has grown over the years resulting in politics of agitation within these regions. The popular notion surrounding the same is that owing to the above stated factor, Jammu and Ladakh face discrimination both in terms of their political spaces and economic share besides the lack of appreciation of their cultural distinctiveness from the Kashmir valley. Emanating from this belief, it is perceived that owing to this perception of marginalization in different spheres, the development of these regions have suffered at the hands of the Kashmir dispensation and the exclusivity of the approach of the Centre with the Kashmir political issue. Therefore, claiming your identity be it the ladakhi identity, or the Jammu regional identity become political tools of seeking political leverage both within the State and in terms of the relation of these sub regions with the Indian state in order to address the question of development of these sub regions.

### **Tracing Development trajectory and challenges of Ladakh Region**

Locating Ladakh within the State of Jammu and Kashmir, also presents us with its own uniqueness in terms of its ethnicity, culture, language and regional requirements. With a population of 236,539 within an area of 96000 sq. km, it constitutes one of the largest regions within the State sharing a border with China and Pakistan thus constituting a strategically important region. Looking at the socio cultural composition of the region, it is largely constituted of the Buddhist and the Muslim population in Leh and Kargil respectively. Ladakhi constitutes the main language spoken in the region. Historically Ladakh shares links with regions of Tibet and Northern Himachal Pradesh besides its distinct racial, religious, and cultural traditions.

In 1834, this Buddhist kingdom was conquered by General Zorawar Singh of the Dogra empire and therefore, became a part of the kingdom of the Dogras of the State of Jammu and Kashmir. Since then, Ladakh was ruled by the Dogra rulers. However, in 1947, during the partition times, Ladakhis were equally apprehensive and paranoid with the idea of Kashmir joining Pakistan owing to a plebiscite as this would result in the complete disruption and subordination of the region in socio cultural terms. Besides, the predominance of the Kashmir region and its leadership on the political front within the State also made the Ladakhi leadership uncomfortable. Therefore, they sent a memorandum to the union government demonstrating their insecurities with regard to the newly formed State of Jammu and Kashmir and their desire of becoming directly governed by the union government. Representatives of the Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) while expressing their distrust towards the Kashmir dispensation asserted their political identity as a separate nation constituted of their distinct culture, language and race and thus demanded their self determination rights within the Indian union.

It was also highlighted by the Ladakhi leadership that since independence and the transfer of political power from the Dogra ruler to the National conference, the political arrangement which had governed the region by the Dogra kingdom of Jammu had also ceased to exist and therefore, they were free to decide their political future independent of the State of Jammu and Kashmir. However, due to the uncertain and political fragile situation of Kashmir, the demands and interests of the Ladakh leadership were overshadowed with the primacy being acquired by the Kashmir region. Even during the dispensation of Sheikh Abdullah, Ladakh continued to be

denied its share in the political arena. As asserted by Kaul and Kaul(1992) Ladakh was deprived of beneficent departments, namely, Agriculture, panchayat and cooperative along with the inadequacy of the medical relief in the region. Besides, keeping in context the extreme climatic conditions of the region, there had been no scheme for electricity generation in the region in the first five year plan of the State government. Also, no efforts were made by the government for the development of tourism in the region.

Besides, the demands for inclusion of the Zaskar region into the Leh unit from Kargil were also brushed under the carpet. Also, the Big Estates Abolition Act(1953) was uniformly implemented across the State without taking into consideration the socio cultural peculiarities of the Ladakh region. The Act implied that the maximum area a proprietor could have was around 182 kanals. This figure had been arrived keeping in context the conditions in Kashmir valley. This act however did not fit into the context of Ladakh with its sandy soils over large stretch which was considerably less productive in comparison to the Kashmir region. As Kaul and Kaul asserts, that the prime target with the implementation of this act was the gompas, which were the epitome of the Buddhist culture as it would dispossess them of their land which would come under the Act. Therefore, the Buddhist perceived this Act as a potential threat to the Buddhist heritage and culture by the Kashmir dispensation.

In the field of infrastructure also, nothing had been stated in the budget for improvement of roads and other means of communication within the district as was asserted by the ladakhi leader Kushok Bakula in 1952.

Besides this, in the field of education, there was a discontinuation of the scholarships and grant in aid for the schools for the students of the backward region of Ladakh. The apathy towards the development of education was also seen in terms of no science teacher being appointed in the High school in Leh despite there being a provision for the same. This implied that the students could not take science in their matriculation. Besides, the imposition of Urdu language in the ladakh primary education system as a medium of instruction demonstrated the insensitivities of the State towards the cultural context of the Ladakh region. The Buddhists were also kept out of the important services as well as ordinary jobs within the State. It is corroborated by Kaul and



Kaul(1992) who points that though the Buddhists were in majority in the district, yet their representation in totality in the government services was just 27%. Also, no adequate rehabilitation measures were taken by the State dispensation towards ameliorating the condition of the refugees in Zaskar who had suffered at the hands of Pakistani raiders.

Therefore, owing to these factors, the Ladakh region and their leadership harboured a feeling of discrimination and marginalisation at the hands of the Kashmir dominant dispensation within the region. This marked the amplification of their demand for self determination and regional autonomy in order to address their concerns of development rooted in their recognition and redistribution claims. Thus, the development concerns of the region justified their demand for autonomy within the State of Jammu and Kashmir. Besides, the region equally remained absent from the political imagination of the Indian state which is explicated through Sonam Chosjor(quoted in Rekha Chowdhary(eds.) 2010) stating that “opening of the Demchok- trade-cum- pilgrimage route, which can prove to be a boon for the fragile economy of Ladakh, is still a wishful thinking because of lack of political will on the part of the Indian policy makers”(Sonam, 2010).

Besides, in the 1960s, the political turmoil following the Sino Indian war, Indo Pak war and the uncertainty surrounding the political future of Kashmir further overshadowed the developmental concerns of Ladakh region. However, a spurt in the developmental efforts in the region was seen after the 1962 war with China which demonstrated the strategic and military necessity of creating accessibility in the region. Therefore, the development efforts in the region during this period were largely focussed on the creation of infrastructure keeping in context India’s military requirements. A lot was done in increasing the accessibility of the region with the establishment of an airport in Leh and the building of road connecting Srinagar to Leh. Road infrastructure was primarily improved owing to the easy movement of the soldiers in the region. Therefore, it can be said that though development in the region was undertaken through state intervention during this phase, however, it was largely dominated by the strategic interests of the state rather than the prime concerns of development of the people in general as areas such as public health, and education still remained inadequately considered.

However it cannot be denied that this phase also resulted in the boost to the local economy and improvement in the living standard of the people as corroborated by the census report of 1971 which reflects an increase in the literacy rate within the region. Besides, it also acknowledged that there was a pressing need to address education needs at the post matric level due of lack of adequate facilities for the same as the students had to either migrate to Jammu or Srinagar for pursuing their higher education. The report also followed through the backwardness and lack of development in the Leh region which still lags behind in the development indicators of public health, public safety, public works etc.

Therefore, it was found that during this period as well, though development efforts were undertaken in the region, however the pace and the efficiency of these plans was considerably affected by the twin reasons of the political turmoil in which the State was clouded during this juncture along with the content of these programmes being dominated by the sovereignty and strategic needs of the state itself.

The issue of development and regional imbalances in the same was further taken up by the Gajendragadhkar Commission 1968 which further corroborated the dismal development story of the Ladakh region as it affirmed that the development story of the ladakh region was still considerably insufficient despite the government efforts towards development in the region in its five year plans. It also stated that the focus area of development plan expenditure in the region was largely seen in road construction which acquired primacy over other areas like forests, agriculture power etc. Besides, the Commission recognised the need to give Ladakh its due share in terms of its representation in the political system of Jammu and Kashmir with an exclusive cabinet minister in the State cabinet from the Ladakh region and the recognition of the region under the backwardness category. It also suggested the establishment of development boards in the region along with cadres specific to all the three major sub regions within the State.

The recommendations of the report further intensified the feeling of marginalisation and discontentment in the pace of development of the region owing to the political dynamics operating within the State. Besides, the State government did not make adequate efforts to reduce this feeling of discontent and injustice of the Ladakhi population which was well manifested in the lack of political will to implement the recommendations of the commission.

The Sikri commission which was appointed by the State government with the bifurcation of the Ladakh region, further enquired into the regional imbalances persistent within the State which further acclaimed that the region of Ladakh had been confronted with backwards compared to the other two regions of the State. It raised important arguments with respect to fund allocation as well stating that the State of Jammu and Kashmir claims funds from the central government on the basis of its geographical area, however, the same were horizontally distributed to the Ladakh region on the basis of the population of the respective region. This further added to the feeling of discrimination being faced by the region. Therefore, it suggested that this formula of allocation must be revised in order to correct the skewed nature of development within the State. However, the State of Jammu and Kashmir remained apathetic to these recommendations which were reflected in its inaction towards the same. This further added to the growing feeling of alienation which was simmering amongst the Ladakhi population towards the State and thus took a toll on its legitimacy within the Ladakh region as well. The report further pointed out that Kargil was less favoured in comparison to Leh within the Ladakh region also added to the complexities of the demand for regional autonomy sought for Ladakh as a whole as both the regions were constituted in majority by Buddhist and Shia Muslims respectively.

The census report of 1981 further demonstrated the dismal record of development indicators in the Ladakh region with respect to the literacy rates in Leh which was 28 % with the lowest number in the educational institutions within the State. Besides, in the area of public health also, the region presented a dismal picture with just 9 primary health centres in the Leh district.

Therefore, this further accentuated the assertion of autonomy by the Ladakhi leadership correlating the goal of development with autonomy and seeking the former through the latter. It was believed that the bureaucratic development planning followed by the state in conformity with the modernist approach of development was not really working in favour of the Ladakh region. The region required a model of development which was more sensitive to its socio cultural and political realities to be able to work sustainably in the region. Its demands for development were also seen recently in the protests organised in Jammu and Ladakh region in terms of raising their grievances pertaining to higher education being inadequately available within the Ladakh region and therefore the demands for a full fledged university for Ladakh by various pressure groups representing Ladakh region. Besides, there have been government plans

instituted in order to allow railways too to reach the Ladakh region, thus increasing the connectivity and Ladakh's association with New Delhi. However, these development efforts towards promotion of tourism and catering to the strategic requirements of the state owing to the Sino India border in the Ladakh region also demonstrate the nature of the development story imagined by the Indian state for the region which remains guided by the national and state interests and inadequately reflect on the interests of the local populace. These efforts are based on the presumption of enhancing the confidence of the people of the region and increasing the legitimacy for the state efforts towards development in the region by mainstreaming the region and perceiving it under the same homogeneous category of development. However, these development interventions need to be analysed from a critical lens owing to the sensitivities and the regional requirements of Ladakh besides the internal power dynamics operating with the sub region itself.

Further looking at the development trajectory of Ladakh and the persistent neglect of the region by both the State of Jammu and Kashmir as well as the Indian leadership, it also becomes imperative to see as to how the internal political discourse within Ladakh operates. It has been asserted that the demands for development for the region have largely been spearheaded under the leadership of the Ladakh Buddhist Association which mobilises the local populace for meeting their development aspirations under the garb of the Ladakhi identity. However, it has been asserted time and again as to who constitutes a Ladakhi? Is it the region, ethnicity, culture or the religion. The Ladakhi leadership as asserted by Sonam Chosjor(2010), lacks the coherence in terms of defining the attributes or the elements constituting Ladakhi identity. Besides this, the discourse of defining the Ladakhi identity by LBA in exclusive and communal terms further adds complexities to the politics of the region and its development discourse. Due to the nature of politics of LBA lacking inclusiveness, based on the idea of self and the other, leading to the alienation of the Muslims in the region in the power politics of Ladakh. Therefore, it needs to be seen that when the demands for development of the Ladakh region manifest in the form of assertion for regional autonomy, does this constitute a holistic demand of the entire region, or of the political elite dominating the power dynamics within the Ladakh region. This implies as to how the power would be further distributed within the Ladakh region after the realisation of regional autonomy and who would constitute the stakeholders in the same. Would it lead to the

realisation of the development aspiration of the region or would it further create a battle ground for competing identities for political space, needs to be deliberated. Besides, it also remains to be seen that whether the realisation of the political demands for development, recognition and redistribution for Ladakh would capture the internal political realities of the region or would further create the category of dominant and marginalised groups within the sub region and lead to further demands for regional autonomy.

### **Conclusion**

Therefore, after having looking into the theoretical concerns of the development discourse, and the empirical case of Ladakh and its development trajectory, it can be inferred that its story of development is essentially related to the marginalisation of the region in the political engagement of the State with the Indian government and the lack of adequate understanding of the regional specificities within Jammu and Kashmir by the Indian state. Besides the marginalisation of sub region within the political discourse and power structures within the Jammu and Kashmir State itself also adds to the development aspirations of the Ladakh region manifested in its assertion for autonomy. It can also be seen in terms of lack of percolation of political autonomy horizontally within the sub regions of the State of Jammu and Kashmir besides the political dynamics and the distribution of power within the State itself. Besides, it can be seen that the approach that is followed in development planning by the Indian state towards the State of Jammu and Kashmir in terms of the bureaucratic and centralised model of development, the same gets replicated within the State as well in terms of the approach of the State government towards addressing the development within the various sub regions constituting the State of Jammu and Kashmir has further resulted in the emergence of regional movements for autonomy within the State. Therefore, it becomes imperative to critically analyse the approach and the model of development put forth by the state for the Ladakh region and try and reconcile the same with the complex reality in terms of the power dynamics operating at an intra regional level within Ladakh and its regional sensitivities. Therefore, there is an imperative need to look at the the inter linkages between politics, identity and autonomy and relating the same with the nature of state functioning and the models of development that inspires the same.