The widespread sensitivity of identity in Jammu and Kashmir has assumed a great political substance since India’s independence and its role has been a subject of prolonged and sustained discussion. Muslim identity often referred to as Kashmir nationalism, has been a long and dominant identity struggle by the Muslims for its own historical reasons which they believe are equally valid till the present day. Again it is the Kashmiri identity which is challenged by the Dogra (Hindu) identities of Jammu plains. Kashmiri’s objection against Dogras for ruling them over hundreds of years is as much a part of the daily political debate as the Dogra’s feeling of disempowerment of them by the Kashmiris. Towards the North in Leh, Ladakh, Buddhists are in majority, they having a feeling of never being a part of any packing order of the state. Their demand for separation from Jammu and Kashmir State and the protection of their identity as a Union Territory is as old as the issue of Kashmir. So it’s Hindus that dominate the Jammu region, Muslims in Kashmir valley and Buddhists in Leh, Ladakh, and they believe that it is their identity and region that intersects to marginalize and politicize the concerns within the state and nation. In course of defending their religion, heritage and distinct culture, Buddhists have raised their voice politically. Though there has been a wide literature available on Kashmiri Nationalism but scholars have generally ignored the issue of cultural autonomy and reconcilement of Buddhists in Ladakh region. Drawing from extensive research in Ladakh region, my purpose in this chapter is to present firstly, an overview of the religion in Ladakh, and secondly, to study religion and its role in society. Along with this, I have tried to present an account of contemporary religious and political practices in Ladakh, which may help to understand the processes involved in the intercommunion between religion and politics. Whenever, the term religion is used it means to cover Buddhist identity as focus of study is an Buddhist population of Leh District.
BUDDHISM AND SOCIETY

Being a part of silk route, Ladakhis ensured that the land never lacks in its cultural and religious diversity. The dominant form of Buddhism practiced in eastern and central Ladakh is the Mahayana Sect of Buddhism, which includes two major orders named as ‘Gelukpa’ and ‘Drugkpa’. Along with a very little population of ‘Saskyapa’, ‘Nyinamapa’, ‘Dringupa’ orders. It is believed that in the 2nd century A.D. some of the portions of Ladakh were under the King Kanishka and he patronized Buddhism in the region. Many inscriptions of that period have been discovered in Zanskar. As Francke says “Buddhism got such a firm hold in Kashmir that the fourth legendary council under King Kanishka(125-152A.D.) is said to have been held at Jalandhara in Kashmir.

After reaching the Indus valley, one can suddenly feel the air of the Buddhist land. There are Chorten1, Mane walls2 made up of stones with inscription “ōm mane padme hum” engraved on the slates. Before approaching the settlement, there are large size prayer wheels to the left side which signify the Buddhist belief that the turning, of a prayer-wheel is equivalent to saying one’s prayers. On the roof of the Buddhists houses, prayer flags (tarchog) in various colors, red, blue, yellow, green and white flutter in wind. It is believed that if tarchogs are hoisted at the high rising places, the air which passes through them spirituality helps all living being who come into contact with the air.

The demeanor of Buddhist life is filled with philosophy of impermanence and compassion but what plays major role in the lives of Ladakhi is the institution of monasteries. In Leh district, every large village has a monastery. Monasteries are the vibrant centers of Buddhism in this Trans-Himalayan region and are repositories of rich Buddhist culture and guardians of age old Buddhist philosophy. These institutions have played a vital role in spreading the Buddha’s eternal message of peace, compassion and non-violence. Every monastery facilitates religious training and education to its resident monks (lamas). Not only reading and writing are taught in the Gonpa, painting and dancing are also inalienable elements of their daily curriculum. Monks can be easily identified by the red robes or choga which forms their attire, their heads are shaved and

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1Commemorative cairns, like pepper stone posts. These edifices contain relics of saints, venerable monks, and dead relatives.

2They are the structures of breast height, stands before approaching the settlement on the left side. Mane wall are long wall of stones and mud
most of them go without covering it, but Rinpoches and the Buddhist monks of higher rank wear hats of different designs.

The heads of Ladakh’s major monasteries are believed to reincarnate as Rinpoches and by virtue of their enlightenment it is believed that they can choose where to be born. (crook, 1997). When a Rinpoche walks in public, as a mark of reverence, the local people prostrate before him, with head bowing and hands reaching out in his respect.

Rinpoche provides a leadership to the community of hundreds of monks. In ancient times, nearly all the families would send their sons to these monasteries to lead a life of monk. Mostly, monks are the youngest sons of the family but off lately there have been changes seen in the above state practice. Let us see the views of the respondents regarding sending their children to a monastery.

**Views of respondents on Religion**

Except one household from Markha, each household has one of their sons, who has gone to a monastery to live a life of monks while 2(2.08%) household have their daughter living a life of nuns. Whereas on the other hand in Leh, only 7(7.30%) families had their sons in monastic life and 1(1.04%) families had their daughter in nunnery practicing as nuns. In an overall analysis, it is interesting to note that, not only there is rural–urban contrast in admission of monks and nuns in the monasteries and nunneries but a wide male-female difference as well. Let us first answer the rural-urban difference.

Respondents believed that one of the main reasons for this rural-urban difference is economic condition of the families. As people of Leh have abundant resources that enable them to make a decent living while in Sku-Markha the sources of income are very limited and making both ends meet is quite contrary to the people of Leh. Since the monastery caters to the needs of its monks, it becomes one of the reasons for the people of rural region to send their children to lead a monastic life. Another reason for less number of monks enrolled from the urban area is gauged from the view of one of the respondents:

> Now a days the pattern of planning family amongst the Buddhists has changed and it has become akin to outside world. For example, there
are small size families having one or two children. If we send them to monasteries, then who will look after us when we are old and carry on our family line. So there has been a decline in number of monks enrolled in the monasteries”.

As stated above shrinking of a large family size structure and formation of nuclear families with one or two children in urban Ladakh has hampered the families from sending their children to monastic life, while rural Ladakh has a large number of children in the family, that is one reason why there are more children enrolled in monastic life from rural parts of Ladakh. Lastly there were a few respondents who thought that media mainly television has played a role in changing monkhood scenario among the youth of Ladakh.

The male-female contrasts lead us to the question why only a small number of females are opting for nunneries in comparison to large number of males who are opting for monasteries. A common answer received for this contrast is a very small number of nunneries existing as compared to the number of monasteries. It makes virtually impossible for the family members to send their kin to a far flung land while it is easier to send a boy to a monastery adjoining the same village. So with less number of nunneries there is low admission of women, leading a life of a nun.

Not only does a monastery plays a seminal role for the monks and nuns but it also hosts important religious ceremonies, festivals and rituals involving days or weeks of celebration which are attended by the villagers and the visitors who assemble at the village monastery (Hodge, 1991:78-79). The annual cycle of rituals begin with the onset of winters, as winter is said to be a time of happiness; the climate keeps people at home with no agricultural work to do most of time is spend socializing and going to festival. The prime series of festivals are staged by each monastery where dance drama (Cham) is performed by monks. The Lamas wear colourful costumes, that is, long brocade gowns set off by quaint headgears. Masks worn by the lamas represent various guardian divine powers. Demons and protectors are called forth for a display of the mythical hierarchy of lamaist Buddhism. The drama always ends with the defeat of evil forces. The drama (Cham) operates at more than one level, at one level the contemporary forces of evil are conjured up and dispelled clearing the area of negativity and ensuring well-being. While on the other level, the events can be read intra-psychically eliminating bad karma of both
the participants and onlookers and promoting a spirituality aiming at ultimate enlightenment.

**Buddhist Rituals within the household:** There are ethical practices which the Buddhists associate with the laws of Karma. Killing, alcohol drinking and smoking have negative karmic consequences, while prayer, prostrations, pilgrimage and donation to monasteries are seen as having a countervailing beneficial effect. The laws of karma determine the fate of the soul in the after-life and require ethical practice. I stayed for a few months for three consecutive years with the Buddhist family in Leh, this is what I daily observed:

Ache Yangldol renewed the offering bowls of water and lit a butter lamp in the prayer room (*Chodkhang*) every morning and evening and performed a number of prostrations, while Morup (her husband) carried a small censer of burning juniper around the house, blowing smoke into every room and calling invocation to the local gods. Before going to sleep and on waking, everyone performs the standard three prostrations and recites the prayer by which individuals take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.

Monasteries are not the only source of spiritual introspection, social and moral obligation and religious teachings but they also act as economic beneficiaries for those in needs. Some monasteries own a lot of land; either used for agricultural purposes of the monastery or used as camping sites by the travel agents for those tourists who come for trekking. There are apartments, and shopping complexes that are owned as well as run by the monastery. In the times of need, the monastery lends money to the needy. The process of give and take between the monastery and village sustains a rich cultural and religious tradition in which all members of society are involved and the benefits is accrued to everyone. On a broader societal level, however, the monasteries offer real economic benefits. Religion in Ladakh acts like an umbrella covering all the aspects of social structure. After having described in detail the role of religion in daily lives of Buddhists, we shall now move towards the interplay between religion and politics.

**An overview of the interplay between religion and polity**

In a bid of maintain the distinct lingo-cultural identity, Buddhists have been demanding either the regional autonomy or Union Territory status for Ladakh, ever since India got independence. There is a feeling of ethnic marginalization, and subjugation of Buddhists...
by the Muslim ruling Kashmir state, which variously has come to assume state-identity credibility. In order to comprehend polity and religion relationship fully, it is important to review the historical situation which evoked identity consciousness among the Ladakhis.

Development of identity among the Ladakhis can be traced back to 1931, which involved the perusal of a first oral presentation of problem pertaining to the Buddhists of Ladakh, in regard to discrimination meted out by Muslims that was made before the Glancy Commission\(^5\). It reveals that for the first time there was a growth of distinctive “ingroup consciousness” and notion of Buddhist minority syndrome came up. Then came the Indian Independence, when the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir was contemplating the future of the State in 1947. It provided an opportunity for the leadership of the Young Men Buddhist Association (YMBA) to assert its role as a voice of Buddhists of Ladakh. YMBA feared a merger of Kashmir with Pakistan and submitted a memorandum to the Maharaja in 1947 with three options:

1) the Maharaja could maintain direct rule over Ladakh,
2) Ladakh could be merged with the Hindu majority parts of Jammu in a separate administrative unit and;
3) Ladakh could be permitted to join East Punjab (later Himachal Pradesh) (Bertelsen. 1997:146)

However, Maharaja never responded to the memorandum, hence the President of YMBA, Chewang Rigzin Kalon, presented another memorandum to the Prime Minister Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru. It stated the following:

“We are a separate nation by all the tests-race, language, religion and culture-determining nationality. The only link connecting us with the other people of the state being the bond of a commoner ruler. If the Indian National Congress could persuade itself to recognize the Muslims of India as a separate nation, although they had so much in common with the other elements of the Indian population the Government of India should have no hesitation in recognizing what is patent and incontrovertible fact in our case” (Madhok.1992:19)

\(^5\)Named after the chairman Bertan Glancy, who was a senior official on deputation to governmental duty. By the late 1920s and early 1930s, the rule of the Maharaja in Jammu had attracted severe criticism from the British side for exorbitant taxation, forced labour and increasingly troubled relations between landowners and titlers that had led to protest and demands for the revision of the political and governmental structure of Jammu and Kashmir. Therefore, this commission was set for the inquiry in this matter.
Since the Indian government was engaged in negotiations over the Kashmir issue at the United Nations (UN), thus Ladakh’s statements were not dealt in, as Central Government believed that separate deal to Ladakhi Buddhists would indicate willingness to carve up the state and would result in weakening of the Indian point of view at UN. So Ladakhi voice to maintain distinct identity was unheard inspite of their real problems.

On 15th August, 1947, the famous Ladakhi historian Abdul Ghani Sheikh wrote,

“..."When Hindustan was created and a new Nation, Pakistan, was born, a strange kind of uncertainty spread in Ladakh. When the entire nation was celebrating Independence Day, there was no celebration in Ladakh. People were very concerned about which nation we would be joined with Hindustan or Pakistan" (Sheikh,1999:184-185)

By October of that year, the uncertainty was laid to a temporary rest when Maharaja Hari Singh signed the instrument of accession, whereby Ladakh and rest of Jammu and Kashmir came under the jurisdiction of India (Aggarwal,2004:36). It was argued that the Buddhist population had been given a raw deal following the transfer of power from the Maharaja to the democratic institution of federal India, without consulting people of Ladakh; the region had been included in the new political and administrative order of the state (Bertelsen,1997:129). One such example of discrimination can been seen in the first budget of State, where no allocation was made for Ladakh’s development. Kushak Bakula protested in the State Assembly for this discrimination by saying that: “Read the Budget statement from one end to the other, you will not find Ladakh mentioned even once” (Bertelsen,1997:195).

With the passage of time Ladakhi Buddhists felt more discriminated and alienated in the Muslim dominant state. For the same reasons they demanded their succession from the Kashmir and for voiced direct association with India. They had raised demands in 1968 for Regional Autonomy and in 1972 for Central Administration. In August, 1989 a series of protest were again launched by the leaders of Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA)⁶. Rigzin Jora stated that “Our grievances could be summarized in one line; all this while, we have been denied our share in the government, be it political, administrative, educational or economic”. “We have nothing in common with the Kashmir. Their ways

⁶ It is an semi-political organization earlier known as Young Men Buddhist Association formed in 1938. Works in different villages against the social evils such as polyandry, dowry, caste discrimination.
of living, of walking, sleeping, eating, praying, dressing, speaking are totally different from ours" (Bertelsen, 1997: 148). The movement emphasised their poor and inadequate political representation in the State Assembly and the total neglect and discrimination in the socio-economic development of the Buddhist-majority Leh district. They reiterated the general perception that the Valley had always treated Ladakh ‘as a colony’.

Although the initial demand to secure Union Territory Status for the Ladakh was not acceptable to the Central Government, given the complexities of Kashmir issue, yet constant efforts of LBA played a pioneer role in securing an Autonomous Hill Development Council for Ladakh. But Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC) was not assigned real legislative and executive powers, all they could control was economic development. Once again LAHDC representatives held a meeting with the Union Home Minister in February 1999, reiterating the demand for Union Territory status then. In February 2000, the LBA joined Hindu organizations of Jammu and parts of Kashmir representing the Pandits demanding that the state should be divided into four parts, Jammu, Ladakh, and a separate region each for the Hindus and Muslim of the Kashmir valley.

From the perspective of many Ladakhi leaders, direct rule from Delhi once again seems the only viable way of protecting Ladakh’s interest. LBA and local political organization are preparing for a struggle to get attention for their demands, which still revolve around demand for UT Status, the allocation of resources, employment and political power. In a memorandum submitted to Government of India’s interlocutors on Jammu and Kashmir during their two day roundtable conference in Jammu, the President of Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA), Dr Tsewang Tundup, strongly asserted for Union Territory status to Ladakh with legislature of its own. In the memorandum, Dr Tsewang Tundup clearly stated that

I began by saying that the struggle for survival of our own community, art and culture- has remained our core issue particularly since India’s independence when Ladakh was merged with Kashmir against our wishes. We share no homogeneity with Kashmir in terms of culture, language, and ethnicity; moreover, sheer geography isolates us from rest, many
laws legislated by government often go against the people as they do not match with our land and people. Our motive is to join the national mainstream shoulder to shoulder in the strides of development that would be feasible only if we are allowed to decide for ourselves instead of resting the control in the hands of Kashmiri leaders. (Epilougue.2011.5(08);44).

Along with President of LBA (Ladakh Buddhist Association), the President of Ladakh Young Buddhist Association, also submitted a memorandum to an interlocutor, in which he clearly said that there was inherent inter-regional and distinct regional-identity in terms of history, physiographic, ethnicity, language and culture. Ladakh has distinct social-customs and ethnicity and has no integration with the Kashmiri speaking Muslim population of Kashmir valley and Jammu region with Dogri as their language and Vedic culture (Epilougue.2011.5(08);44). But it seems that their demand for UT Status will meet the same fate as what Kashimiris demand for Azad Kashmir has been meeting over the years.

Ladakh, being part of Jammu and Kashmir, is still affected at every level of development due to religious and regional causes of Kashmir’s insurgency which corresponds with the political instability in Kashmir valley, although it has escaped the scale of uncertainty and violence that the Kashmir valley has to deal with daily. Still, when the phrase “the voice of the Kashmiri people” is invoked for seeking resolution for the Kashmir conflict beyond exclusive negotiations between Pakistan and Indian heads of the state, political analysts generally ignore perspectives from Ladakh. Buddhist-Muslim relationship in J &K has been increasingly viewed in terms of minority-majority divide. For further details about contemporary political structure of Ladakh, we need to throw some light on role of religion in politics and analyze whether religion plays an important role in politics or not. Let us start with the local power structure.

**Community power structure**

Power is derived in Ladakh community either from Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC) or by the Panchayats and by the traditional power structure, that is, *Goba* system. LAHDC comprises of twenty-six elected and four nominated members, who hold office for tenure of five years. A Chairman selected from
the elected members serves as Chief Executive Councilor (CEC), and it is CEC’s responsibility to nominate a four-member Executive Council.

Panchayat system is a new concept in Ladakh. Under the Panchayati Raj Act 1989, a halqa panchayat has been established in each village, or group of small villages, with elected members and a leader called sarpanch. Elections for Panchayats were held for the first time in April 2001 and then May-June, 2011. The 2001 Panchayat elections did not yield much result as villagers did not benefit as much as they had hoped. Before Panchayati Raj came into existence in Ladakh, it had the traditional community power structure, the *Goba* system in which *Goba* is the nominal head of the village. The system still marks its presence in contemporary Ladakhi political structure. *Goba* is responsible for resolving disputes, taking decision about village’s festivals, overseeing water rotation and making new rules. Though arguments are unusual, but Goba is responsible for conflict resolution. The *Goba* is usually appointed by rotation. If the whole village wants to retain him, he may hold his position for many years, but otherwise after a year or so, the job is passed onto the other person.

The major flaw of traditional Community Power Structure (Goba system) is its unequal distribution of power among the different social groups which make a few more fortunate while others remains under privileged. The new system of elected Panchayat is undoubtedly considered as a force for change but as mentioned earlier it did not yield much benefit in 2001. However, the Ladakhis are hoping for better results this time. In regard to the effectiveness of traditional Panchayat viz-a-viz the elected Panchayat system, respondents were asked to give their responses as to which of these system was more effective. Out of the total 96 respondents of Leh (urban), 60.42% stated that the traditional panchayats are more effective than the elected ones whereas only 39.58% stated that it is the elected panchayats that are more effective than traditional Ladakhi panchayats. In case of Sku- Markha (rural), it’s surprising that half of the population believed that elected Panchayat are more effective and exactly half (50 percent) believed that the traditional panchayats were more effective than its counterpart.

*Goba* is responsible for the land settlement at the personal level; he is the right person who has in-depth knowledge of the village and the land acquisition of the villagers.
Respondents from Sku-Markha believed that be it traditional Panchayat or elected Panchayat, it has been of no use to the natives, as the person nominated as Goba and the ‘panch’ at the time of elected Panchayat, is the same person, who belongs to an influential family. One of the respondents revealed that “In both tenures, he has not been of any good use to us, it is same for us whatever the mode of election in our village be”. In an overall comparative analysis of the Leh and Sku-Markha, it is evident that the majority of respondents in Leh believed that the traditional panchayats were more effective, until and unless the elected panchayats were not given any funds and essential power for the development of area. But people of Sku-Markha were reluctant for both kind of political setups (panchayats and Goba system respectively).

Lobsang Wangyal who held the post of village headman (Goba) and is now serving as the panch of Markha for years, says that:

As such I am responsible for peace and order in the village, I have to inform and call the villagers to labor as prescribed by the various government schemes which includes construction of buildings and bridges, and for transport duty for those bringing raw material for the construction purposes on ponnies and donkeys and I have been successfully fulfilling my duty as a Goba and panch.

While on the other hand villagers contradict the claims made by the village head men and complained of his inefficiency.

“Neither he informs us about the new schemes nor is he helping in anyway and this happened when he was Goba and its happening currently when he is a Panch. We are highly frustrated with his inefficiency regarding the village development. It is a government official, ‘Babu’ from the adjoining village, who helps and spreads awareness about various new development programs and new schemes. He has been a great help to us”.

There are Ladakhis who face the dilemma of whether to reject the panchayat system or do away with the goba.

In addition to their views on elected and traditional panchayat, an attempt has been made to analyze the people’s participation through voting behavior in elections at different levels, that is, local, regional and at National.
As shown in the above table, out of 96 respondents, 96.88% respondents stated that they voted at local level elections while there were 3.12% respondents who did not participate in voting. Further 91.67% respondents voted at the regional level elections and there were 8.33% who did not vote at the time of regional elections. On the other hand, large number of respondents 92.71% exercised their voting rights at national level elections while there were 7.29% respondents who did not participate in the national level election voting process. On the other hand, in Sku-Markha (rural) out of the total 98 respondents, 73.47% respondents revealed that they voted at regional level elections while 26.53% respondents did not vote in the elections. Besides 64.29% exercised their voting right during national level election, while 35.71% of respondent did not vote at the national level elections. For local level, about their voting choice, they revealed that in 2001 and 2011 panchayats elections, the decision was unanimous. In an overall analysis of the above data, it clearly indicates that the urban population exercises their voting right more at all the levels than rural folks, who are still not as active in exercising their right. Maximum number of respondents at Leh voted at the time of local level elections followed by the national level election and then regional level, while in Sku-Markha, their leader was unanimously elected at the local level but more number of respondents voted at the regional level than at the national level.

For further inquiry, respondents were asked about their political affiliation, Out of the total (96) respondents of Leh (urban), majority 91.67% stated that they were affiliated...
with political party, 8.33% revealed that they were not affiliated with any political party. Whereas in case of Sku-Markha (rural), there were 84.70% respondents who revealed that they were affiliated with a political party, and 15.30% respondents mentioned that they were not affiliated with any party. But when asked to reveal their party affiliation, they were reluctant to answer the question. They justified it by saying that it is very personal to reveal the name of the particular party to which they had affiliation.

As they did not respond for the party affiliation, an attempt was made to study their preferences to select a leader, at various elections that is preference given to attributes like ‘political party affiliation’, ‘individual merit’, ‘religion’ and ‘region’ to which the candidate belongs.

Table 4.02: Distribution of respondents on the basis of preference they give while voting at the time of elections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S. No.</th>
<th>Preference while voting</th>
<th>Local level</th>
<th>Regional level</th>
<th>National level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Leh</td>
<td>Sku-Markha</td>
<td>Leh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Political party affiliation</td>
<td>78(81.25)</td>
<td>86(87.76)</td>
<td>27(28.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Religion of leader</td>
<td>8(8.33)</td>
<td>4(4.08)</td>
<td>45(46.88)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Region Of leader</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>22(22.92)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Individual merit</td>
<td>10(10.42)</td>
<td>8(8.16)</td>
<td>2(2.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>96(100.00)</td>
<td>98(100.00)</td>
<td>96(100.00)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figures in brackets represent percentage

If we take into consideration the voting behavior of the respondents on the basis of their preference while voting for particular candidate in different elections, it is observed that the majority (81.25%) of respondents in Leh (urban), considered political party affiliation as the most preferred option while choosing a candidate at the time of local election,
followed by individual merit of the candidate (10.42%) and finally there were 8.33% respondents who gave preference to religion at the time of voting for the candidate in Local elections. While at regional level, a large number (46.88%) of respondents in Leh, believed that region of the candidate plays an important role in selecting their candidate, followed by 28.12% respondents, who preferred ‘political party affiliation’ of the candidate while voting. There are 22.92% respondents who believed that ‘religion’ plays an important role in regional election and 2.08% respondents’ preferred ‘individual merit’ of the candidate over other factors. On the other hand in Sku-Markha, at local level elections, the majority (87.76%) of them gave their preference to ‘political party’ to which they were affiliated while voting for the candidate, there were 8.16% respondents who preferred ‘individual merit’ and only 4.08% respondents preferred ‘religion’ of the candidate while voting in the local elections. In case of regional elections, again large number of respondents (43.88%) preferred political party affiliation of the candidate, followed by 37.75% respondents who believed that ‘region’ to which candidate belongs plays an important role. Then there are 18.37% respondents who consider that ‘religion’ is an important factor in regional election. In case of National elections, it was surprising to note that all respondents (100.00%) gave their preference to ‘political party’ to which the candidate was affiliated. The data analysis of the above table shows that whichever might be the elections, (local, regional or national level) both rural and urban folks preferred ‘political party affiliation’ of the candidate while voting, followed by ‘religion of the candidate’, and then ‘region of the candidate’ in that order becomes an important factor while selecting a candidate. Lastly it is important to note here that there are not many respondents who gave preference to the ‘individual’ merit of the candidate, except in the case of Local elections, where only a handful of respondents believed that individual merit of the candidate played an important role in choosing a leader.

The issue of religion had emerged and became an important factor while selecting a candidate in election only after the 1989 agitation in Ladakh, when communal politics crept into peaceful Ladakh society. The relationship between Buddhist and Muslim communities of Ladakh are now strained after long tradition of coexistence. The Dalai
Lama in August 2003 had appealed to masses regarding religious pluralism and to promote peaceful coexistence but this philosophy has not found many takers. Though on the surface, things appears to be calm but the actual situation is very different. There is ethnic conflict between these two communities which is reflected in their preference of choosing a candidate.

When a question like how significant is the role of religion in the political process was asked, majority of respondents from both urban and rural areas responded that the religion had strong bearing on the political setup of the area. A large majority 93(96.87%) of respondents of Leh and 95(96.94%) respondents of Sku Markha believed that religion acted as a determining force in a political process. Only 3 respondents each from urban and rural parts of Ladakh believed that religion does not play any role in politics. They further revealed that they more felt connected to their religion and through it to its people. If somebody belonging to their own religion contests in an election it naturally becomes their moral duty to vote for the fellow villager of the same religion. From this, we get an idea as to how religion influences in the political practices of the region. It can be said while analyzing the role of religion in politics, that there exists a very strong 'we feeling' or 'ingroup Consciousness' among the Buddhists. It is the first step towards asserting their identities which further fuel their demands for greater autonomy. They believe that they have been denied their share in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, this counts to be a strong reason for which they have come together for religious-political purpose. Below mentioned are the views of the respondents that gives the reader an insight into their demands concerning regional autonomy or acquiring Union Territory Status.

On inquiry about their demand for Union Territory Status for Ladakh, cent percent respondents of Leh were in consensus for UT Status demand, whereas in case of Sku-Markha, there were 91(92.86%) respondents who were in agreement for a UT status to be given to Ladakh. Another 7(7.14%) respondents disputed over the demand of the UT status. There disagreement originated from the ineffectiveness of LAHDC. They opined that UT status if granted would meet the same fate as LAHDC has proved to be. But there
are voices within the segment of Ladakhi society who believe that attaining UT status for Ladakh is unfathomable. The reason stated by one of the respondents is as below:

> UT Status for Ladakh seems to be impossible because our representation in the parliament is miniscule. Even if there is a consideration for our legitimate demand of granting the UT status for Ladakh, it gets overlooked because of the larger consideration for Kashmir valley of which Ladakh has been a part. We need a skillful leader to raise our demand I wish the day will come when people of Ladakh will have their own regime free from Jammu and Kashmir. But the main problem here is that Kashmir wants Azadi which seems meaningless to Indian Government and that goes against for Ladakh’s demand for UT as well

The other respondent replied to the same question in the following manner:

> The fundamental aspects of our distinct identity should attract the attention of the Central Government. We are divided socially, culturally and linguistically. It should compel the Central Government to mull over granting the UT status to Ladakh. We need persuasive leaders who can push forward the demand that has been lying in comatose. It remains to be seen how youth of the region come together for the cause and toil for their land. It is now their responsibility to wake up and fight for our right.

The above two statements are the reflection of Ladakhis still struggling for the demand of UT status. At the same time they have come to believe that their demand has been not met for two reasons. Firstly, for being a part of the trouble state of Jammu and Kashmir. Secondly, because of their feeble representation at the National level Government.

In an overall analysis, it can be said that there is interplay between the religion and polity where both of them are interwoven in Ladakh. Both play a significant role in each other’s space. Not only does religion drive the politics but religion permeates all aspects of life in Ladakh, inseparable from art, music, culture and agriculture. For further analysis, few questions were asked from the respondents regarding their attitude towards religion.
Table 4.03: Distribution of Respondents on the basis of their attitude towards Religion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S. No.</th>
<th>Attitude towards religion</th>
<th>Leh (Urban) Mean Score Value</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Sku-Markha (Rural) Mean Score Value</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Religion is a cause of communalism</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>One must believe in particular religion</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.51</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>One cannot be moral without being religious</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Eating in the company of followers of other religion/caste</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents were asked to rate a set of statements provided to them on a three point scale of importance as ‘most important’, ‘important’ and ‘least important’ in regard to their attitude towards religion. They were asked to rate these statements, a statement rated as most important was assigned a score of 3, while that considered as least important was given a score of 1. The statement which was rated as important was assigned a score of 2. A mean score value was worked out for each of these statements in both the areas. The higher the mean score value, the higher was the rank assigned to that factor.

The respondents in Leh as well as those of Sku-Markha stated “religion is a cause of communalism” (3.00) as the most important factor. According to respondents of Leh, “believing in a particular religion” (2.23) was ranked as the second important factor followed by “One cannot be moral without being religious” (1.44) was ranked third in the
priority list. The least importance was given to “would you mind eating in the company of followers of other religion/caste” (1.08). These responses were similar in Sku-Markha as well. Respondents of Markha also believed that “religion is the main cause of communalism” (3.00) followed by “one must believe in particular religion” (2.51) at second place followed by “one cannot be moral without being religious” (1.57) was ranked third followed by “eating in the company of the followers of the other religion/caste” (1.00) at the bottom of the priority list. Though it is ranked low but there are examples of the individuals, complaining and voicing their displeasure in having a meal in company of the follower of Shia sect of Islam. An incident was narrated by 35 years old Rigzin Phuntsok, a lecturer at Government Degree College said:

On several occasions we have been treated like untouchables by Shia Muslims. It is more disheartening when educated lots of Shia Muslims behave like that. If we drink water from public taps, they wash it several times before using it, just because we do not belong to their community and we are Buddhists. Same goes to utensil in which food is cooked, either they will wash it or if food is already cooked in that utensil and we have touched it, they will not eat that food. What can be more mortifying than this?

All the respondents mentioned that they did not mind eating in the company of other caste members, as the Ladakhis believed that there was no caste system as such prevailing in Ladakh, yet in depth observation into their culture points out, that there is something on the lines of caste system which is being practiced in the region. We need to throw some light on this silent caste system that Buddhists practice in their religion.

**Buddhism and silent caste system**

According to historical and archeological records, stratification was present even in small wandering bands that characterized society in the earliest days of man. However, the nature and type of it varied from society to society. Essentially, it means the arrangement of any social group or society into hierarchical positions that are unequal with regards to power, property and social evaluation. In this way, society consists of various strata or layers of social positions that individuals or groups occupy within social system. Buddhism being considered as a casteless religion; being more egalitarian, it attracts
Dalits and Scheduled Castes for the conversion of their religion. Every year a large number of people are converting into Buddhism. For some, it is of a source of spiritual growth but for others it is an opportunity to change their caste status quo. Buddhism is truly known as a casteless religion, but in Ladakh there are certain practices in Buddhism which give an observer an ample belief that there exists a caste system even in so called casteless religion. The caste system of Ladakh is probably one of the most ill-understood and neglected entities. Research done by Martijn Van Beek (1996) on census document dating back to colonial times reveals that caste was a principal category of organization in Ladakh until the 1911 Census, but by the 1931 census, religious affiliation had become a determining factor for identifying a community within Ladakh (Aggarwal, 2004:169).

The Buddhists of Ladakh have a feudalistic social structure, where the Gyalpo, (gyal-rigs) are the lineal descendants of the monarchs who once ruled the land and occupied the top position in the social strata. Next come the aristocratic families or nobility (sku-drag) whose ancestors had options of honor under the royalty and bore the titles like kalon, kharpon, Lonpo. They are now comparatively wealthy, enjoy a comfortable life and pump their savings in the flourishing tourist industry. Then comes the well to do commoners (mang-rigs) who enjoy considerable material prosperity and forms a sort of lower middle class. At the base of the social pyramid, in general are the artisans and the laboring class in general. The victim of social discrimination lower caste (rigs-ngan) goes by the name of Mons, Gara and Beda. Despite the Constitutional guarantee of “Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth” under Article-15 of the Indian constitution and “Abolition of untouchability” under Article-17, Mon, Gara and Beda caste groups are victims of many violations in Ladakh.

‘Mons’ play religious tunes in honour of the gods. ‘Garas’ manufacture plough-scissors, arrow-heads, knives, axes, stoves and repair all kinds of pots and pans. The ‘Bedas’, positioned at the lowest in the strata, belongs to the caste of songwriters and musicians. A sizeable number of songs that are known in Ladakh have been authored by this caste. Mons and Gara have their own land, house and livestock just as other villagers, with whom they have special relation involving definite rights and obligations. Bedas do not
own any land. They ramble around tents, begging and playing music here and there. They are beggars who sing mostly using the tambourine. The payments they receive are only in pure charity.

Social stratification in the case of Ladakh is a visible feature that determines seating arrangements. The one with the higher rank in the hierarchical level is seated higher in the Dral. Monks take the highest seats, according to their own hierarchies of seniority, followed by the upper class and then the commoners, with the outcaste at the bottom. Mon and Gara regularly bear the humiliation of being seated at the end of the Dral. But Bedas, are even denied access to the Dral altogether. Stepping outside the boundaries of one’s position in the Dral or failing to respect the etiquettes of seating, can lead to friction and even to ostracism from the society. Discrimination does not end here, but they are also deprived of becoming the head of the village (Goba) and head of the monastery irrespective of their proficiency due to their caste identity.

Other than this, the reasons of purity and pollution are articulated by Ladakhis as well to legitimize caste hierarchy. Even today, it is widely believed by villagers that having sexual contact with low castes is ritually contaminating (see also Gutschow, 1998). Once in a while, caste differences would be superseded by romantic love, generally in the case of women from the oppressed castes marrying into upper caste families. One of the most famous cases of inter-caste marriage recorded in Ladakh’s history is that of Tshewang Namgyal (1760-82), whose scandalous marriage to a woman from the Beda caste almost cost him his throne and had tragic consequences for her (Aggrawal, 2004:160-161).

The XIV Dalai Lama in his sermon delivered protested against the division of caste among Buddhists. In 1985, the Dalai Lama made history by visiting the house of a smith, where he was felicitated by members of all three oppressed castes. Photographs of his holding up drumsticks and beating a Daman are hung in several homes. The Dalai Lama has openly expressed his disapproval of caste, denying that it has any basis in Buddhist doctrine (Aggarwal, 2004:164).

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8The dral is a ranking system. It is used to recognize the social superiority of monks, nobility, the superiority of gender and age.
Lower caste people have been warning the upper caste members that if the discrimination against them persisted, they would have no recourse but to convert to Islam (Aggarwal.2004:173). Conversion has been a major factor governing the politics of Ladakh since 1989 agitation. The anxiety of conversion has finally motivated the LBA to mobilize a campaign against caste difference, but its execution is very slow.

The practices of Ladakhi Caste system are somewhat flexible than those existing in the other parts in India, (For example there is no restriction about entering the house of upper caste people and public places, as it is seen in many parts of India where people from lower caste are not allowed to enter the house of upper caste or any public places.) Lower castes are generally invited by the upper castes and vice versa in their social ceremonies such as marriages and other festive occasions. Though inter-caste marriages are still not accepted but there have been one or two cases of inter-caste (love) marriages. In the selected areas for the research, there was not a single household of the Mon, Gara and Beda. People from urban areas would call Mon and Gara for their various works like playing music in their marriage ceremonies or their household works like carpentry or agricultural labor etc. Villagers from Sku- Markha stated that all the work of playing drums to carpentry was being done by the villagers itself, as there were no lower caste people in the area. Moreover, they do not feel ashamed or stigmatized in playing drums in their ceremonies.

Career opportunities provided by higher education and the modern marketplace has led to changes in caste system. Many lower caste families are now opting for government jobs or many have joined army or tourist business, since scenic beauty of Ladakh naturally gives boost to tourism industry. These are all becoming new sources for changing their social standing and occupation. Due to rising demand for house building, many Mons have left their profession of being a musician. They devote themselves to construction work and trade. Beda group now use their marketing skills in the modern economy, selling turquoise, pearls, and vending stalls or even successfully running antique shops for the tourist sector in Leh Market.
The progressive upper caste Buddhists who view caste discrimination as the cause of social backwardness have organized a forum known as the “Society for Promotion of Social Equality of Ladakh”, which was registered in 1999. The society aims to function as a philanthropic non-profit association to ensure better educational and economic opportunities for the downtrodden and boost their morale and sense of belonging to a religion and a nation. Encouragement from rural and urban members of upper castes, spread of education and economic growth are bringing changes in this silent caste system practiced in Buddhism.

Changes taking place in Buddhism

During my fieldwork in Ladakh, I was fortunate to attend Ladakh’s most famous monastic festival at Hemis. Like other viewers, I could not stop myself from admiring the awe-inspiring ‘Cham’, a mask dance performed by monks to show victory of good over evil. The performance left close to 5000 spectators, of which majority was foreign nationals sitting in the courtyard, completely spellbound. When the festival got over I went inside the monastery to experience the spiritual aura of the place. Ancient paintings, wood carvings and statues inside the monastery bear true testimony to Buddhist ascetics. The hymns murmured by the women sitting nearby mesmerized the complete atmosphere. It was a German Couple who was busy clicking photographs and the shutter sound of camera completely disturbed the women in the meditative state. Later, I passed by them and in a brief conversation they told me that they had paid online to a travel agent for this trip. What astounded me was that they had got their seats booked on the roof of the monastery a year back to have a better view of the one of the most ancient religious ceremonies of Buddhist performed that day. They revealed that their whole purpose was to capture the pictures of the monks performing with the high resolution lenses, so that once they reach their land they can make postcards out of those clicked pictures and commercially use them. Once I came out of monastery, I met a Lama (monk), who assured to me that it is “of course” not the practice but the faith of the people for which they come here. These two different versions of conversations made me go back to the notion which Meyer described as “two ontologically distinct spheres –the spiritual and the technological – collide” (Meyer 2009: 1).

The monks are as guilty as the tourists for this debasement of religion and culture. The tourists have no idea what the dances are all about and monks provide no clues. The monks have wantonly abandoned their spiritual mission to teach Buddhism not only to
Buddhists but to those as well who come seeking for it. For some, the Hemis monastery and its festival is their regular place of worship, while for others it is a tourist destination. Much has been written about how Buddhism is depicted in monastic festivals, in carved wood and in historic paintings. Or, about how these contesting faiths are embodied in priestly practices but what about role of technology, media that has made this spiritual affair a money minting process from travel agents to filmmakers and tourists. What do these distinctions suggest about their relationship to this place, these objects, practices, and images? This might reflect on how these religious practices and sites have incorporated modernization into its working. What is happening in Ladakh is not unique. Culture everywhere is being pummeled by arrogant uneducated tourism. It is not only Ladakhi monasteries where a mindless consumerism of tourist has changed the course of religious practices but the rest of country shares a same story.

The whole environment in Ladakh is changing rapidly, with advancement in scientific technological developments and it is real challenge for Buddhist monks to adjust to these sudden changes. A worrying symptom of change is that many young monks are willing to leave their monastic life for the charms of the outside world. Monks can now been seen with modern gadgets like headphones and mobiles in Leh market. Monks are seen driving a vehicle. This has become a common practice in Leh market these days. To my astonishment I saw a monk using swanky cell phone whose market price was around 40 thousand Indian rupees. one of the monk justified the use of gadgets by monks in the following ways:

Buddhism teaches us to use commodity for necessity but if it is used for sake of luxury then it certainly negate the teaching of Lord Buddha. He further said use of vehicle and any other gadgets has been of great help to the monks to commute and communicate while he is on his duty to perform monthly rituals at far flung villages. There is difference between ownership of vehicle, if one uses it for the necessity that what Buddhism teaches us, but if someone uses vehicle or anything else for the sake of luxury, then they are certainly violating precepts of Buddhism. If he has vehicle he can cover many houses in a day, otherwise walking all the way in villages would take him too long. Earlier he used to just cover one or two houses while walking. These vehicles have saved the walking time for monks and left them with
more time for studying and for their self evaluation, and participating in monastic activities.

They justify using these gadgets by saying that they are used for necessity. Usage of these gadgets are valid till the time there are used as a necessity but what about those cases where they are used as a source of luxury. The principle aim of “Enlightenment” in Buddhism has shifted to a discourse of “necessity versus luxury”.

Then comes the relationship matters, the close relationship that existed between the monastery and village is declining. Young people seldom participate in religious activities in monastery and even in their houses. Today people do not seem to have enough time to learn Buddhist doctrines and participate in religious activities. But there are organizations like ‘Socially Engaged Buddhists of Ladakh’ working for the preservation of withering Buddhist philosophy and practices. One of the members stated that:

However, today’s development and changes are not a threat to Buddhism because Buddhism can accept an ever changing phenomenon of impermance (annicca). Also we cannot hinder the development of technology simply to save traditional social values. Many traditional values are based on myths, beliefs and superstitions. It remains the duty of the present generation and coming ones to preserve and strengthen the achievement of the past against the corrosive forces of materialist age, and to work devotedly so that message of Buddha highlighting the significance of wisdom and compassion may take still firmer and deeper roots not only in Ladakh, but may also spread a beneficial influence all over the world.

Inspite of many changes taking place in religion, the majority of respondents (Leh) believed that there was no such evident change seen in the religion. As many as 57(59.38%) respondents out of total of 96 stated that religion has not changed over years but there were 39(40.62%) respondents who believed that religion has changed in the recent past. When asked the same question, the people of Sku Markha (rural Ladakh), a vast majority 92(93.88%) of them revealed that there were no changes seen in the religion of Ladakh and only 6(6.12%) stated certain changes in the religion in the recent past. In an overall comparative analysis of Leh and Sku-Markha, respondents of both the areas that is, urban as well as rural believed that there had not been any major change in
the religious aspect of Ladakh. Those who answered in the affirmative were further asked that what were the changes that have taken place in religion over the years; they believed that monastery and monks used to be source of guidance for them, but now both play different role. Monasteries have become more of a showcase and there are a very few monks opting for monastic life for guiding the individuals.

Various factors responsible for change will be analyzed in the next table.

Table 4.04: Views of respondents regarding factors responsible for change in Religion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S. No</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Leh (Urban) Mean Score Value</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Sku-Markha (Rural) Mean Score Value</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Impact of Tourism and growth of new economy</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Impact of tourism and growth of new economy</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Growth of urban sector</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Growth of urban sector</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Impact of Mass media</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Impact of education</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To understand the views of respondents regarding the factors responsible for change in religion, a set of four factors were provided to the respondents and they were asked to rank these in order of their preference. A factor ranked first, was given a score of one while that ranked second was assigned a score of two. In the same way, the other factors were ranked and the scores were assigned according to there ranking position till the last factor, which was assigned the score of four. A mean score value was worked out for each of these factors separately for Leh and Sku-Markha. The lower the mean score value, the higher was the rank assigned to that factor.

Respondents in both the Leh (urban) and Sku-Markha(rural) areas gave first preference to “Impact of tourism and growth of new economy” (1.46) and (1.76) respectively followed
by the ‘growth of urban sector’ (2.05) and (2.00) respectively at the second place. In Leh area it is ‘impact of mass media’ (2.91) at the third rank in their priority list followed by ‘impact of education’ (3.58) at the bottom of the priority list. While in case of Sku-Markha at the third rank it is “impact of education” (2.53) followed by “impact of mass media” (3.71) at the last rank. Above analysis confirms our hypotheses that it is growth of economy and impact of tourism that has affected the institutions like religion as well. Tourism has brought employment opportunities to many and sudden inflow of cash in religious organizations. Monasteries have been providing monks as tourist guides, and these monks earn good money in the peak tourist season, as each tourist guide earns rupees 1200 per day for being a monastic guide. So in order to earn more, they are gradually leaving their monastic life. While factors like mass media through various means like western and Indian film and television to large extent has also brought changes among Ladakhi not only media but sources of new media like mobile phones, video games have also changed their attitude in case of urban population, as there people in Sku-Markha are still not connected with electricity, so mass media through many ways does not affect their lives.

To sum up, one may be tempted to suggest that Buddhist atmosphere can be experienced everywhere in Ladakh. Buddhist monasteries, Stupas, Mane wall, brightly coloured flags flutter on the roof tops and monks are visible everywhere. Today all sects of Tibetan Mahayana Buddhism are represented under the sermons of HH the XIV Dalai Lama. The demeanour of the people is affected by the religion and can been seen in daily practice as older people in particular recite mantras as they walk and as they work.

The Gonpa plays important role in lives of Ladakhis and are the living heritage of Buddhist philosophy. Almost every village in Ladakh has its own monastery, with monks residing in them to fulfil the religious needs of the devotees. In ancient times, nearly all the families would send their sons to these monasteries to live a life of monk but with changing times there has been a decline in this practice. There are still large number of families from the rural parts of Ladakh who have send their sons to a monastery to live a life of monk while there are very few families from Leh (Urban). Doing so there is rural-
urban contrast in admission of monks and nuns in the monasteries and nunneries. One of the main reasons for this rural-urban difference is the economic condition of the families. As people of Leh have various resources of earning for their living, while in Sku-Markha, economic condition of the villagers is not that good. Another reason given by the respondents is formation of nuclear monogamous families, which is considered as important factor for the low fertility rate and less numbers of children in house. Few believed that it is media (television) and tourism that has played role in changing monkhood scenario among the youngster.

In the monastery and nunnery there was a difference seen in the number of males and females joining them respectively that is, more males were becoming monks as compared to the number of females becoming nuns. The reason given for this was that there is seldom a nunnery, near to village unlike monasteries, Boys are sent to the nearest monastery to lead a life of a monk but it becomes difficult for family members to send their daughters to far off nunneries.

Along with acting as seminary for the monks, a monastery also hosts important religious ceremonies, festivals and rituals involving days or weeks of rituals and prayers carried out by the villagers and the visitors who assemble at the village monastery (Hodge. 1991). On a broader societal level, however, the monasteries offer real economic benefit and help the needy at their crucial times.

As for the role of religion in politics, it is indeed the perception and apprehensions of ethnic marginalization, subordination and subjugation of Buddhists at the hand of Muslim ruling Kashmir state, which give rises to tate-identity credibility. Ladakhis being Buddhists, always felt alienated and discriminated in Jammu and Kashmir State. Firstly they could not connect to the Muslim dominated state due to their distinct lingo-cultural factor as their religion was more akin to that of Tibet, and secondly inspite of the strategic location, Ladakhis were not given what they deserved economically. Various investigations such as Gajendra Gadkar Commission, (Government of J & K 1968, 24-25) have been set up for slow delivery of funds which left Ladakhis disheartened and
discriminated against by the State Government.

The issue of religion has emerged and became an important factor while selecting a candidate in election only after the 1989 agitation in Ladakh, when communal politics crept into peaceful Ladakh society. There is now a strained relationship between Buddhist and Muslim communities of Ladakh. Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA,) a semi political-religious organization played an important role in attaining Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC). LBA activities were much influenced by religious leaders, high monks, who were able to use their authority to add to the movements' power and influence. It got supported by religious organizations like Ladakh Gonpa Association (LGA), which had a similar agenda to reform religious practices. It is only after the 1989 agitation, that religion has emerged as an important issue while selecting a candidate in elections.

When question like how significant is religion's role in the political process was asked, the majority from both urban and rural areas gave their consent that they believe religion played a significant role in politics. They further revealed that they felt connected to their religion and its people and if somebody belonging to their own religion contests in election. They felt it was their duty to vote for the candidate from the same religion.

It is observed while choosing a candidate, at the local, regional or national level elections, both rural and urban folks preferred to look at the political party to which a candidate was affiliated while choosing their candidate, then came the religion of the candidate, that plays an important role in the voting behavior of the respondents, followed by the region to which the candidate belongs, and finally the 'individual merit' of the candidate. One can conclude that along with political party affiliation and it is religion of the candidate that plays an important role in selecting the candidate as their representative at the local, regional and national elections. This inquiry also supports our view about interplay between religion and politics.

Ladakhis have been demanding UT Status for Ladakh since independence, but their demands have not been met till date. On inquiry about their demand for Union Territory
Status for Ladakh, cent percent respondents of Leh were in favor of a UT status demand. But then there are others who believed that attaining of UT Status by Ladakh is impossible. They believe they have failed to get UT Status for two reasons one, for being part of Jammu and Kashmir, secondly Ladakh’s political voice is weak due to low representation of Ladakhis in the Parliament. Ladakhis perceive their position within the Indian nation as politico-economically marginal. In an overall analysis not only does religion drive the politics but religion also permeates all aspects of socio-cultural life in Ladakh, inseparable from art, music, culture and agriculture.

Another astonishing feature of religion in Ladakh is that Buddhists observe a diluted form of untouchability which the Buddha had denounced vociferously which each Buddhist believes. The victim of social discrimination *rigs-ngen* goes by the name of Mons, Gara and Beda. ‘Mons’ play religious tunes in honor of the gods. ‘Gara’ manufacture plough-scissors, arrow-heads, knives, axes, stoves and repair all kinds of pots and pans. The ‘Bedas’, positioned at the lowest in the strata, is a caste of songwriters and musician. Though the practices of Ladakhi Caste system are far more flexible than other parts of India, as there is no restriction about entering the house of upper caste people and public places, as it is seen in many parts of India that lower caste people are not allowed to enter the house of upper caste. There has been a strong movement on the part of the urban-based elite, including the LBA, to abolish discrimination against the lower castes. Not only LBA but each individual should put a whole hearted effort to cast out the caste system in Ladakh.

Religion over the years, has undergone a change as they believed that monastery and monks used to be earlier a source of guidance for them. But now both play a diverse role. Monasteries have become more of a showcase and there are very few monks opting for a monastic life. The monks are as guilty as the tourist for this debasement of religion and culture. The tourists have no idea what the monastery and various festivals and dances are about and the monks provide no clues. The monks have wantonly abandoned their mission to teach Buddhism. Much has been written about how Buddhism is mediated in monastic festivals, in carved wood and historic paintings. Or, about how these contesting
faiths are embodied in precisely practices but what about role of technology, media that has made this spiritual affair a money minting process from travel agents to filmmakers as well. What do these distinctions suggest about their relationship to this place, these objects, practices, and images? This might reflect on how these religious practices have incorporated modernization into their working. What is happening in Ladakh is not unique Culture everywhere is being pummeled by arrogant uneducated tourism practices.

The whole environment in Ladakh is changing rapidly; as Ladakh is advancing with rapid scientific and technological developments. It is a real challenge for Buddhist monks to adjust to these sudden changes. A worrying symptom of change is that many young monks are choosing to disrobe and leaving their monastery life. Monks can been seen in Leh market with headphones in the ears and playing games on the mobiles. To my surprise there was a monk using I phone 4. The process of change in monkhood includes, monks commonly seen driving vehicles, including bikes and cars. They justify using these gadgets by saying that it is their necessity. Usage of these gadgets are valid till the time it is used as a necessity but what about those cases where they are used as a source of luxury. The whole discourse of “Enlightenment” in Buddhism has shifted to discourse of “necessity versus luxury”.

The close relationship that existed between the monastery and village is declining. Young people seldom participate in religious activities in the monastery as well as their houses. Today people do not seem to have enough time to learn Buddhist doctrines and participate in religious activities. However, there are organization like Ladakh Buddhist Association working for the preservation of the withering Buddhist philosophy and practices.