



Strategic Delimitation of Indo-China Border and the Consequent Cultural Crisis of Buddhism in Ladakh

SKALZANG DOLMA

Research Scholar,
Central University of Punjab, Bathinda.

DR. ASHWANI KUMAR

Assistant Professor,
Central University of Punjab, Bathinda

A state's or a nation's borders are recognized as an essential component since they assist to identify and categorize the specific state and its citizens. In the domains of politics, economy, social connections, and security, borders continue to play a multitude of purposes. The territoriality that is essential to the idea of a "state" is embraced by borders. The ultimate political authority of a given territory was granted to the "prince" of that territory by the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia,¹ which replaced the Pope and the Holy Roman Emperor.² The prince's administration was granted total authority over the land and its citizens, and no outside power was allowed to legally dictate how the state or its citizens were to behave. The nation-states that arose in the Westphalian system which gave the territoriality component was absent from the prior feudal organisation structure. Therefore, defining and demarcating state borders was one of the main purposes of borders; it described the territories under legal authority and indicated the places where states had rights and obligations.³

The liberal or pluralist approach and realism are the two approaches or theories that were established with borders in consideration. The security of states is the main focus of the realism approach, which views boundaries as a legal entity. It holds that by delineating the locations of nations and their absolute and relative separations from one another, borders enable a spatial approach to international or global politics. On the other hand, liberal and pluralist theories contest realist theory and maintain that boundaries create a wall that obstructs international communication, economic interdependence, and integration. This method challenges the notion that there are significant frontiers in this highly interconnected, globalized world. They contend that boundaries both promote and inhibit human contact.⁴ Starr and Thomas argue that territory is always of high value or importance to people and groups thus it raises the stake and value of border conflict. For example, the South Asian countries of India and China in 1962 clashed over their border.⁵ The main reason for the war was the contest over large areas of territory claimed by both countries.⁶ The extent of a government's power is also determined by its borders. Within a nation's borders, citizens are required to abide by its laws and pay its taxes. The residents of the territories are obligated to abide by the laws and policies that the state has promoted. Borders, however, are also seen as a hindrance to the flow of ideas and cultural activities or exchanges in this globalized world where nations are focused on interconnectedness. For instance, during the 1800s and 1900s, European colonizers set borders for many African nations without the consent of the local population which hampered with the cultural practices of that particular region.⁷

The present paper also addresses a similar situation in which the demarcation of boundary and borders by the colonial powers or the imperial powers has only resulted in the dissemination and degradation of economic and mostly cultural and spiritual links between the Himalayan region of Ladakh and the Tibetan kingdom. As a major tourist destination today, Ladakh is well-known not only for its breathtaking natural beauty but also for the widespread practice of Buddhism that draws in large numbers of both domestic and foreign visitors. A lot of people are drawn to the Buddhist monasteries located at the top of the mountains in every village. It is however, challenging to determine the historical context of the spread of Buddhism in the area because the texts and inscriptions that describe the period before the late 15th-

century establishment of the Ladakhi kingdom are either legendary or fragmented. Thus, the exact date of Buddhism's arrival in Ladakh cannot be determined. The Kanika stupa built by the Kushans in the Zaskar valley during the first and second centuries CE is thought to be the most notable evidence of the early Buddhist presence in Ladakh.⁸ The historical association with the Chorten of Sani dates back to the reign of Kanishka 1st, a Kushana ruler. There is very little surviving evidence to substantiate or disprove the assertion that Buddhism reached Ladakh during the Kushana period.⁹ Prior to the arrival of Buddhism in Ladakh, the locals there worshipped a pantheon of gods and goddesses known as Shamanism or Bon religion and the centre of its faith's authority was the modern-day Lamayuru Monastery.



Fig 1. The “Kanishka” stupa in Sani Zaskar¹⁰

In the eighth century, under the leadership of the Tibetan king Stongstan Gampo, Buddhism experienced a brief golden age in Tibet and its surrounding regions. This period of prosperity persisted under the reigns of emperors Trisong Detsan and Tri Ralpachan. Buddhism experienced a later fall under Emperor Lang-darma's rule. However, it was revived in Tibet in the eleventh century by King Yeshe Od of Guge, the younger grandson of Skilde-nimagon.¹¹ Several Buddhist monasteries were also built throughout the Ladakh region during this period. It is said that Lo-tsa-va Rinchen Zangpo, a scholar working for the Guge king, built these monasteries. Among these are the Nyarma monastery, which was pillaged during the 16th-century Turkic invasion led by Mirza Haider, and the Alchi Choskor, which is well-known worldwide for its murals.¹²

After the assassination of King Lang-dar ma in Tibet there was struggle for the succession of power. Later on, Skil-de-Nimagon acceded the throne and he divided the territory of mNaris-skor-sum which comprises three provinces, La-dwags or Maryul, Guge and Purangs amongst his three sons, in which Lachen dPal-gyi-mgon inherited Maryul (upper Ladakh) and became the real founder of Ladakhi kingdom in 10th century, bKra-shis-mgon took Guge and Purangs, and lDe-gTsug-mGon received Zaskar and Spiti.¹³ The sources tracing the chronology of the successor of the mGon dynasty is very scarce and fragmented. However, it is believed that Buddhism took a stronghold in the region during that period.

A number of significant monasteries belonging to the ancient Kadampa sect were constructed throughout the 12th century, specifically under King Lhachen Ngosdup Gon.¹⁴ These included the monasteries of Spituk, Likir, and Thiksey. This period saw the sending of novice monks to Tibet to get instruction in

Buddhist philosophy. In Ladakh, Buddhism grew almost unopposed until the middle of the 15th century. However, in the fourteenth century, Mir Syed Ali Hamdani arrived in Ladakh (1382 CE) and performed the region's first Islamic conversion. It is claimed that he constructed the Shey mosque. A tiny portion of the populace in Ladakh was later converted to the Noorbakshi sect of Islam by Shamsuddin Iraqi during his visit there in the 15th century. Thus, early Muslims were Kashmiri traders who moved to Ladakh and married Ladakhi women.¹⁵ King Jamyang Namgyal (1595–1616) in an attempt to stabilise the region, invaded Baltistan, but he was routed and captured in the ensuing battle. When the King married Gyal Khatoon, a Balti princess, the war came to an end. She travelled to Ladakh accompanied by a sizable entourage, which settled at Chuchot¹⁵. The Ladakh King Singey Namgyal in the 17th century invited the distinguished Tibetan master Staktsang Raspa to Ladakh. He received both financial and political assistance from King. He constructed a number of monasteries throughout Ladakh, the most significant of which was the Hemis monastery, which was built in 1630 on a former royal domain that the King had granted to Staktsang Raspa.¹⁶

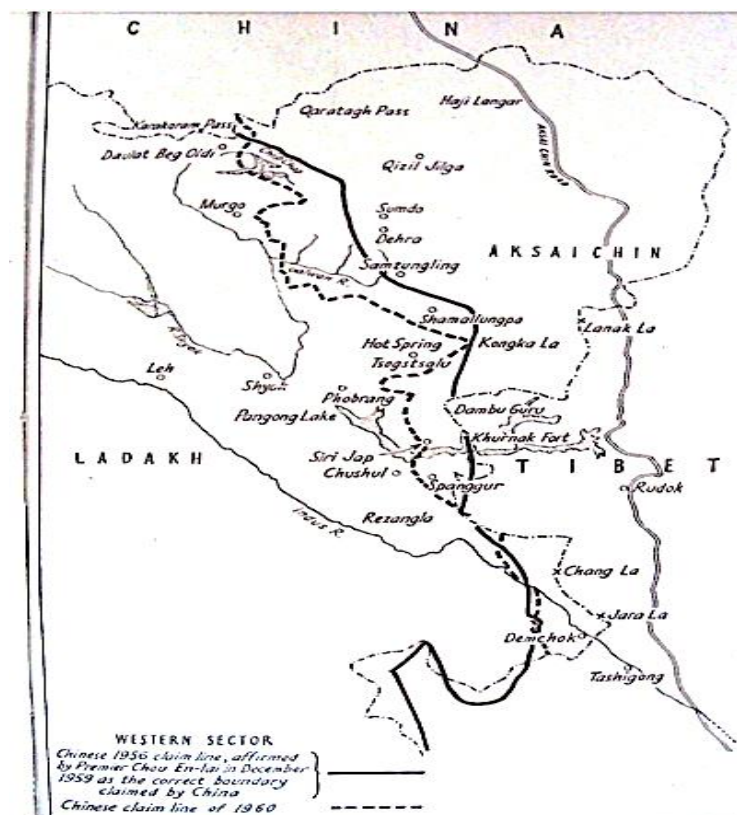
Ladakh from earlier times enjoyed a special and important connection with the Tibet region, whether be it politically, economically or religious point of view and when most of the Buddhist monuments in India were destroyed or abandoned and the Buddhist religion underwent a decline at the end of the 12th century, Ladakh turned to its north-eastern neighbour, Tibet, which had already received the complete works of Indian Buddhist science. All Buddhist literature imported from India were translated into Tibetan, and Ladakh launched an intercultural conversation that would endure for millennia.¹⁷ In earlier times, numerous lamas from various countries travelled to Tibet to pursue advanced education. Numerous Ladakh monks also travelled to various Tibetan monasteries. Other than the Lamas sent by the royal family, who were mentioned and documented, there were no records of the number of Lamas from Ladakh who went to Tibet for education.¹⁸ For centuries Ladakh and Buddhist Tibet had a firm and consistent cultural link, which led to the growth of several monasteries in Ladakh. Several Tibetan Buddhists, including the one who invented the Tibetan alphabet (Thonmi Sambhota),¹⁹ travelled to India in the past in order to acquire first hand Buddhist knowledge. Similarly, for their advanced monastic training, monks from the Himalayan region used to travel to various monasteries in Tibet. The Saskya monastery in Tibet is a well-known monastery renowned for its exquisite library, which is home to several irreplaceable works of Tibetan and Sanskrit literature. The Dikung monastery founded by Jig rten gonpo in Lhasa also had many monks from Ladakh especially of the Drikyung pa sub sect for studies. According to Ladakh's histories, during the reign of mNos-dRub-mGon (1300–1325), Lamas from Ladakh began travelling to Tibet for academic purposes. The Himalayan people considered Tibet to be the epicentre of Mahayana Buddhism for two main reasons. First, Mahayana Buddhism originated in Tibet and spread throughout the Himalayan region. Secondly, Tibet eventually developed into a hub for Mahayana Buddhism and the home of prominent Lamas who preached the religion. Although some Ladakhi monks settled in Tibet, many others returned to their home country after receiving their education in various monastic institutions in Tibet and were instrumental in promoting monastic education in Ladakh.²⁰ For instance, Lobzang Phuntsog, the second son of King Deldan Namgyal, became a monk and travelled to Tibet to continue his education. He completed his studies at the Loseling College at Drepung for nine years, earning the title of dGe shes rab yams pa.²¹ He was named the abbot of Thiksay monastery, which at the time was the leader of seven Gelugpa monasteries in Ladakh, after his return from Tibet.

Three routes were taken by the monks who have been to Tibet. The Southern-Eastern route was used by the majority of the elder monks travelling from gZung Lam (the intermediate route). It left Leh and followed the Indus upstream to Karu, then went to Sakti via the Changthang to Tangtse and Chushul, cutting across to the Indus valley by the Tak-la and ending at Demchok. They would next travel to Gartok, a commerce hub in Tibet. Trading groups accompanied every monk who travelled this path. This was the route taken by most of the monks. The alternative route involved travelling by bus and train from Leh via Kargil, Kashmir, and Sikkim, and then returning on foot to Lhasa. The final route, which was taken

by a small number of monks, went from Leh via Lahaul-Spiti, Shimla, and finally Delhi. Train travel from Delhi to Sikkim was followed by foot to Lhasa.²²

The centuries-old practise of sending students to Tibet for education came to an abrupt end when the Chinese invaded Tibet. The majority of the Ladakhi monks were forced to return. This sudden termination had a significant effect on Ladakh's monastic education standards. Fortunately, though, three significant developments have gone in the right direction. Initially, the monks who returned to Ladakh following the Chinese occupation of Tibet were instrumental in educating the younger monks in the region. Consequently, in 1959, the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies was founded in Leh, where novices from various Ladakh monasteries first sought education. Later, the largest monasteries in Ladakh established their own educational institutions within their walls. After the Tibetan government was established in exile in India, several monastic schools were also established there, and many Ladakh monks now attend these institutions to pursue higher education. Several renowned Tibetan professors are employed at these institutes, which are located in Karnataka and a few other locations in India.

The boundaries dividing Tibet and India were essentially uncontested before the Chinese troops occupied the region. The border conflict has its roots in India's British colonial past. China had historically shown little interest in drawing borders because the weak republics that surrounded the country did not threaten Chinese control. Lord Curzon realised in 1903 that Tibet was the most likely region from which Russia would invade British India. It was suggested that the Younghusband expedition's primary goal was to seize military control of Tibet in order to thwart any Russian attempts to invade the nation. Indian troops succeeded in this mission, marching all the way to Lhasa. In his autobiography, *My Years with Nehru: The Chinese Betrayal*, Mulik, the Indian Intelligence Bureau Director during Nehru's tenure in Indian government, writes, "Britain's Tibetan Policy was then entirely based on its fears of Russian expansion in Central Asia."²³



Map 1. Border dispute map between Indo-China²⁴

The possession of the high alkaline plain known as the Aksai Chin (white stone desert), where the borders of Tibet, Sinkiang, and Ladakh march together, is the source of armed conflicts and the potential for full-scale war between India and China. It seemed to Nehru that not a single grass blade grows here, and no

one lives. However, there have been gunfights there, and there is always a risk of conflict. As Ladakh is traversed by a portion of the "Silk Road" that extends southward, it has participated in the trade that was an important source of wealth and a valuable means of idea dissemination in ancient Asia.²⁵ However the outcome of the violent conflicts did no one any favours and, unquestionably, it strained Ladakh's relations with Tibet. For the benefit of colonial powers, the historic trade, cultural, and spiritual ties between the two regions were jeopardised. The Ladakh region has experienced countless losses in the economic as well as religious terms. Due to the political interests of a few large and powerful nations, they were no longer able to visit their most revered and holy site.

Conclusion

The current study demonstrates that, although being an essential component of a state or territory, borders still have certain drawbacks. Before the Sino-Indian War in 1961 (which resulted in the total closing of the borders), the territory of Ladakh and Tibet maintained cultural linkages. These ties were abruptly cut off, without taking into account the people's historical, religious, and spiritual ties. All through the centuries, the mountain passes of Ladakh had been freely crossed, fostering a continuous cultural exchange among the people of the high Tibetan plateau. Although naturally isolated and difficult of access, Ladakh has never been cut off from the Central-Asiatic and Indian cultural atmosphere. However, with the establishment of boundaries this connection has been lost. Nations today are so much engrossed and are delusional with their territorial gains and gains in political and economic dominance that they almost often stop to think about the cultural ties to that specific land. Since the fall of the Buddhism in India, Tibet became a hub for the advanced education of Ladakhi monks. However, following the Chinese invasion and border demarcation the exchange between the two has been distorted. The division of boundaries between India and China has had a profound impact on Buddhism in Ladakh. The once unified region is now divided into two distinct political and cultural spheres. Apart from just cultural and religious links, Ladakh also had important commercial and trading links with Tibet. Every three years, the official Ladakh trade mission, or lo-pyag, travelled to Lhasa. The fact that it carried gifts and letters from the king to the Dalai Lama made the Tibetans view it as a mission bearing tribute. And the fine wool used for shawls (pashm) was the primary import from western Tibet.

Ladakh at present, because of its earlier connection with Tibet is considered to be as one of the last bulwarks of the survival Tibetan culture in its natural environment. Here, in the imposing scenery of the Himalaya, the religion (Tibetan Buddhism), the art, the architecture the Tibetan language, the folklore, are still a living reality, although the region is going through a serious crisis since the sealing of the north eastern borders with Tibet by the Chinese military invaders. Despite these challenges, Buddhism remains a vibrant and important force in Ladakh. The faith continues to provide a sense of identity and community for many Ladakhi's, and it plays a vital role in the region's cultural and spiritual life. Though Buddhism currently thrives under the support of the Indian government and the Tibetan exile population, the discontinuity in communication and exchanges between Ladakh and Tibet has hindered the practise of Buddhism in Ladakh to some extent.

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