



The Role of Social Media in Reconnecting Divided Families in Ladakh

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Abstract: *This paper focuses on divided families in Ladakh, India, and their fractured narratives, and how social media played an essential role in bringing geographical and political divides and bringing divided families together in times of difficulty. There has been less debate and discussion academically about the impact of partition on the Ladakh region. The partition led to the separation of families across newly drawn borders, leaving many displaced and traumatized. While the partition's impact on families in the central region of partitioned countries has been widely studied the stories of families in other regions such as Ladakh remain largely untold. The story of the partition of India in the Ladakh region continued even after the drawing up of the Line of Actual Control (LoC), as it shifted in the two subsequent wars with Pakistan, in 1965 and 1971, leaving behind hundreds of divided families. People in the border villages in Ladakh have fractured narratives; about how their families, and relatives were divided during the shifting of territories between the two nation-states. Sadiq Ali Sadiq who was settled in Balti Bazaar (market) in Kargil was one such divided family. During the partition, he was in Kargil along with his father who has a shop in Balti Bazaar. Most of his family members were in Kharmanang village, which is on the other side of the LoC. Like him, there are hundreds in Kargil and Leh districts in Ladakh. This study is based on first-person accounts and untold stories of divided families in Ladakh, India, and their fractured narrative and the role of social media to reconnect with lost family members, Families in Ladakh have been able to heal some of the wounds of the partition.*

Keywords: *partition, Line of Actual, fractured narratives, divided families, social media.*

Introduction: Historical background

Ladakh and Baltistan are two regions with a rich history of trade and cultural relations dating back to ancient times. The origin of these linkages is undocumented. During the Kushan period, both Ladakh and Baltistan formed a part of the Kushan Empire (Data 1973: 72). In the Seventh and Eighth centuries the history of Ladakh and Baltistan linked up with that of Tibet, until the time after 842 A.D. (Petech Luciano 1977: 6).

According to historical records (Data 1973:73), relations between Ladakh and Baltistan were amicable from the mid-10th century until the 15th century. However, after the 15th century, there were frequent disputes and invasions between the two regions, with neither side gaining a permanent upper hand. The most powerful kings of Ladakh and Baltistan were Sengay Namgyal and Ali Sher Khan Achan, respectively. Nevertheless, they often allied against other regional powers to safeguard their mutual security interests.

Dogra Rule

Intermarriage between the two royal families of Ladakh and Baltistan was commonplace and often had political motives. This practice served as a diplomatic means for making sovereign choices between the states (George T. Halkias 2011: 251). “Exchanges of foreign princesses were also a prevalent form of international diplomacy between Ladakh and the Muslim ruling houses of Purig, Chgtan, Shigar, Khapula, Karche, Skardu, and Kishtwar” (Ibid). Throughout history, there have been several instances of Ladakh kings married Muslim princesses with one of the most famous examples being the mirage between King Jamyang Namgyal of Ladakh and Gyal Khatun, daughter of Ali Sher Khan of Skardo, at the beginning of the seventeenth century (Luciano Petech 1977: 34, also see, Pascale Dollfus 1995: 38). Gyal Khatun was renowned for her personal charisma and beauty and she gave birth to the ‘Lion King’ of Ladakh, Sengay Namgyal are still on the lips of the people. (George T. Halkias 2011:240, also see, Luciano Petech 1977: 34).

The intermarriages created an extensive network of kingship relations and served as political and cultural ambassadors and peacemakers in troubled times’ (George T. Halkias 2011: 252). These linkages were not only limited to the royal families but the cultural linkages were spread to the common people of both regions. Both the regions shared a close cultural and ethnic bond, belonging to the same ethnic complex as noted by P. Stobdan (Stobdan 2008: 23). They have numerous cultural similarities,



including language, dress music, food, and folktales like the Kesar epic. Both regions also celebrate festivals such as losar (New Year festival), Srub-la (festival to mark the harvest), and Mintok-Ltdmon (spring festival of flowers). Interestingly, the musical instrument of surna (oboe) and daman (drum) which are now an integral part of Ladakh's traditional music, was introduced by a group of musicians from Baltistan who accompanied Princess Gyan Khatun to Ladakh in the Seventeen Century (Janet Rizvi 1983, Abdul Ghani Sheikh 2010). Linguistically, both Ladakhi and Baltis use the same Tibetan origin dialect and script, though the pronunciation of Balti is closer to classical Tibetan. (Abdul Ghani Sheikh 2010). Despite the decline of the use of script in Baltistan, the recent initiatives in Skardo and other areas aimed at reviving its language.

The border trade was another important linkage between the regions. Ladakh and Baltistan have maintained a long and consistent trade relationship which has been a source of sustenance for the people in both regions. Several historical trade routes connect Ladakh with Baltistan, including Kargil-Skardu, Leh-Skardu via Churbat-la, and Nubra-Khapula. The trade and commerce conducted through these routes have continued for centuries, contributing not only to the development of close trade relations but also close cultural ties between the two regions. Local traders from both Ladakh and Baltistan were actively involved in this trade, transporting goods, and crossing these mountain routes.

Ladakhi traders would transport their apricots and other agricultural produce, up to the Changthang in eastern Ladakh, exchanging them for pashmina, salt, raw wool, and other animal products. Then they would sell the salt and wool on their way back keeping some for personal consumption. The traders from the lower part of Ladakh would take some of these articles, such as salt and wool to Baltistan and exchange them primarily for apricots. Balti's traders from Skardu would bring barley, flour, and dried apricots to Ladakh and exchange them for wool and other commodities.

The relationships between Ladakh and Baltistan continued for hundreds of years. The partition of India in 1947 and the subsequent drawing of the Line of Control (LoC) resulted in the closure of the trade routes and the division of families on both sides of the LoC.

Understanding Borders in a Theoretical Frame

Now, let me discuss, how borders are defined in theory. According to Bard and Schendel (1997: 211), 'national borders are political constructs and imagined projections of territorial power'. As such, many international borders have been created through negotiations without consulting the people residing in the region. Borders are seen as markers of the territorial sovereignty of states, and they receive more attention than the borderlands, according to Debidatta and Mahapatra (2009: 18). Lastly, a softer and historically more sensitive attitude, to addressing borders is through a closer understanding of the linkages that bind the peoples living within a state and, more importantly, across its borders, Plonski and Yousuf (2018) define borderlands as a home to ethnic, linguistic, and kinship groups that straddle the border, facilitating the flow of trade and movements of people, and those living in borderlands may see the other side more significant than distant capitals and economic centres.

Methodology

Given the above approaches, the research team interacted with the people to understand the humanitarian aspects of divided families in the Ladakh region of India. This study is mainly based on first-person accounts and untold stories. Most of the data in this paper were from a Major Research Project which was supported by ICSSR under the Impactful Policy Research in Social Sciences scheme.

Fracture Narratives

Many families have been separated across the LoC, with most of them living in the many villages in Kargil and Leh districts. Divided families who live in the villages along the LoC in Kargil and Leh are separated through small distances, leaving behind a long history of pain and suffering. These families are still living with their miserable memories and trauma of separation. As reported by locals, Ladakh regions are home to hundreds of divided families. Most of these families reside in villages along the LoC, India and some even live in Kashmir and Dehradun, Uttarakhand.

The divided families who live in the villages along the LoC in Kargil and Leh are separated through small distances, leaving behind a long history of pain and suffering. Some of the people who experienced the partition are still alive, and their stories are passed on from generation to generation. Mohammad Ali, a 72-year-old resident of Badgam village, has been unable to meet his wife for many decades. The interview with him was taken several years back. Sadiq Ali Sadiq, settled in the historical Balti Bazar in Kargil, hopes to reopen the LOC to meet his relatives on the other side before he dies. Unfortunately, he could not



fulfil his wishes as died a few years back. Like him, numerous people in Ladakh still hold optimism about reopening the Kargil-Skardu route. The restoration of the historic trade routes linking Ladakh and Baltistan would yield multiple advantages, particularly the humanitarian significance to the divided families in the regions.

Divided families meeting

For the divided families residing in Ladakh, meeting with members across the LoC is very difficult. One has to embark on journeys spanning thousands of kilometers through the Wagah border in Punjab or via intra-Kashmir routes such as Srinagar-Muzaffarabad and Poonch-Rawalakote to meet with their loved ones. While the Haj pilgrimage presents another opportunity for such families to meet, most families in Ladakh have been unable to avail themselves of these available routes due to the considerable distance involved and the financial burden associated with travelling to Skardu through such a circuitous road.

Role of social media

For the last many decades, people tried to remain in contact through letters and telephone calls. Though letters take a long time to reach their destinations, it was the only mode of communication for them. But, with the introduction of the internet in the region people now communicate via social media.

Social media played a significant role in connecting divided families by providing a platform for communication and sharing information. Families share important information, such as updates on health issues or family events, and reconnect with lost family members.

According to Mohammed Siddiq Hardassi, for many divided families in Ladakh, the chances of meeting with relatives from both sides of the LoC remain a distant dream. Nevertheless, he and others remain optimistic and hopeful, thanks to the development of modern technology and communication system in the region such as social media which has greatly aided in reconnecting with loved ones. Many individuals on both sides of the LoC are actively engaged in connecting with people, using social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp. Two organizations in Skardu, namely 'Immigration of Leh and Kargil Association 1947' and 'Immigration of Leh and Kargil Association 1971' are dedicated to reuniting families separated by the LoC. Similarly, the 'Kargil Cultural and Social Organization' in Kargil is also working on reconnecting families across the LoC. They have a group on WhatsApp entitled 'Hum Saab Kab Milenge' (Personal Interview, June 2016).

Conclusion

To conclude, there are thousands of divided families in the Ladakh region. These families predominantly reside in villages along the Line of Control in Kargil and Leh Districts of Union Territory of Ladakh, while some also live in certain locations in Kashmir and Dehradun, Uttarakhand.

Though two intra-Kashmir routes have been opened in the past, many respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of progress in opening additional routes, attributing it to the slow peace process between India and Pakistan. Different reasons were cited for the need to open such routes. Many people in Ladakh are hoping to open the Kargil-Skardu route. A significant 75 per cent of respondents advocated for their economic benefits, while others highlighted the potential for reviving tourism, particularly adventure and cultural tourism, due to the region's unexplored cultural heritage and picturesque mountain peaks for trekking.

Akbar Ali, a 50-year-old resident of Chuliskambo, Kargil, also emphasized the route's utility during winter months when heavy snowfall on the Srinagar-Leh road cuts off the Kargil region from the rest of India almost for six months. In contrast, the Kargil-Skardu route remains accessible even during these harsh conditions.

Additionally, about 90 per cent of the respondents stressed the humanitarian aspect of opening the route, expressing emotional sentiments about meeting the members of divided families living on both sides of LoC. During the field visit, it was also discovered that the original revenue records of 32 villages on the other side of the LoC are in the revenue department of the Kargil district, while the revenue records of five villages in the Nubra valley in Leh district are in the Baltistan. Some respondents suggested that for confidence-building measures, India and Pakistan could exchange these original records.

The study also revealed that the Ladakh region should be given focus in terms of regional trade and connectivity. Overall, this study not only delves into the historical relations between Ladakh and Baltistan but also sheds light on the humanitarian, economic, and tourism aspects of potentially opening the Kargil-Skardu route, a branch of the Silk Route in the Ladakh region.



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