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POLITICS OF DEVELOPMENT IN LEH-LADAKH: AN ISSUE OF DOMINANCE AND UNDERVALUATION

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ABSTRACT

The developmental agendas have predominated the political practice in Leh-Ladakh and have become a political rhetoric. These developmental agendas have frequently been appearing in the electoral politics of Ladakh merely as conventional promises made by the political parties. These promises of development are being promulgated in the pretext of demands like UT status, Divisional Status for Ladakh, Greater Autonomy to the Hill Council, Tunnels on Zojila and Rotangla passes, Kailash Mansarovarraod, etc. resulting in undervaluing or reducing the importance of primary developmental needs in the fields like public health, education, communication etc. So, in Ladakh, the developmental claims are mainly appeared in the pretext of some bigger long term goals failing to meet some of the genuine needs of the society. Moreover these bigger agendas have tended to be projected as a panacea of all the other small development related problems in some primary fields. Therefore the author's inference is that these conventional big agendas irrespective of the feasibility and properness of timing have been able to marginalize all the other genuine demands needed to be raised.

KEY WORDS: *Development, Agenda, Rhetoric, Hill Council, Demand, Feasibility, Agitation, Pre-dominance, Politics, Health, Education, Communication, Genuineness*

INTRODUCTION

Development as a promise appeared in the rhetoric of Indian politics since 1947 and later became an important issue specifically in electoral politics. This promise was provided with different versions by different political parties at both Centre and State level. Moreover the politics associated to

developmental affairs have become a trait of present Indian political practices.

The region of Leh district which falls under the Jammu and Kashmir State also witnessed different promises of development and it became a central focus within its politics. The campaigning and later canvassing Ladakh especially Leh by

different political leaders during 2014 parliamentary and State Assembly elections was a testimony to the fact that these leaders can only reiterate the past issues and were having no concern about the genuine problems faced by the region. Demands like Union Territory status, Divisional Status, Greater Autonomy to Hill Council, Tunnels on Zojila and Rotangla passes, KailashMansarovarRaod, KargilSkardu Road etc. out weighted the primary developmental issues related to public health, education, transport and communication etc.

Traditionally, the agenda of development have remained a significant feature of the political practice in Leh. The origin of such practices can be traced back to the earliest assertion for representation of Ladakhi people made by a group of Kashmiri neo-Buddhists commonly known as Kashmir-Raj Bodhi MahaSabha (KRBMS) to Glancy Commission in 1931. In order to gain the confidence of the Buddhist community of Leh KRBMS with the help of Kashmiri Pandit teachers and administrators posted in Leh then tried to mobilize people of Leh by establishing an association called Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) and was later converted into Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA). KRBMS addressed some basic issues like lack of education, ban on consumption of local wine (chang) in public gatherings, ban on polyandry and progeniture and people's apathy towards political economy. They considered same as responsible for the backwardness of the region in general and Buddhist population in particularⁱ. So this is how the development related rhetoric began to take root in the politics of the region ever since the inception of the idea of modern representative government in Ladakh.

The situation of Ladakh was not good even after merging with India i.e. after 1947. In the post-independence period the alleged Kashmiri domination and discrimination against Ladakh were projected by the political leaders of Ladakh as main cause of the backwardness of the region. This domination and discrimination by Kashmir compelled Ladakhi leaders to make such demands which may result into discontinuity of its association with Kashmirⁱⁱ. Therefore the demand for Union Territory (UT) status or other forms of autonomy for Ladakh was the result of such a feeling.

Then, the Chinese occupation of Tibet in later 50s compelling its spiritual and political head, The Dalai Lama, to take political asylum in India, the subsequent Sino-India war in early sixties and the consequent feeling of patriotism shown by the people of Ladakh made Indian government realize the strategic and political value of the region.

Therefore generous allocations for its economic development were made by the Indian government which in-turn resulted in the process of politicization and a sense of self-awareness opined Balraj Puriⁱⁱⁱ. Since 50s the alleged Kashmir dominance has been viewed and cited by the leaders of the region as one of the main reasons for the lack of development in Ladakhvis-a-vis other two regions of Jammu and Kashmir. So, Ladakhis started complaining the discrimination faced by the region from J&K government and alleged that the people of the region had been neglected unfairly^{iv}. There after the demand for UT status for Ladakh was again raised in 70sby leaders of Leh in particular with strong support of the community and associations. But it remained an incomplete demand of the region in absence of support from leaders, associations as well as people of the Kargil district.

In the later part of 1980's people mainly of Leh district were once again mobilized by local leaders in the form of agitation against the alleged Kashmiri Raj or Kashmiri dominance which was viewed as main obstacle in the development of the region and argued that Ladakh should be liberated from Jammu and Kashmir state itself. The alternative proposal came in the form of an autonomous hill council on the pattern of Darjeeling Hill Council. Then the Union and State government in an attempt to appease the agitative masses agreed to grant an Autonomous Hill Council for Ladakh which was readily accepted by the people of Leh.A great expectation of development in the whole aspects of people's life i.e. politics, socio-economic as well as materialistic was ensued for given the autonomy of policy and decision making to a local body called Council. The logic of conferring Hill Council to Ladakh was in accordance with the conception of decentralization and localization of policy and decision making authority in the development process considered more proper for the local interest, needs and demands. But Martin van Beek argues that“localization doesn't necessarily seem to differ from the conventional development and the decentralization in theory doesn't necessarily show local influence in the final outcomes of the policies and decisions”^v.

Subsequently though these development agendas have contributed in sustaining Ladakhi autonomy movement within the state or even became political rhetoric within Ladakh. But these haven't made any development or improvement in those primary fields which reflects actual development of the society. So the paradox of the politics of development in Ladakh focusing on Lehis presented or dealt with in this paper in the contrasting issues between three dominating big

agendas and the eclipsed state of three primary fields.

Hill Council Need More Autonomy?

The institution of hill council in its early years failed to live up to the people's expectation and its working was severely criticized. The aim of the development based on ecological sustainability and culturally appropriateness pre-dominated the council's work in the initial years^{vi}. Martin van Beek argues that the disconnection between the developmentalist goals of the elites running the council and those of major sections of the population was reflected in the popular dissatisfaction of the people with the Council^{vii}. Therefore it can be argued that one of the important reasons behind the lack of popular support of the people to such initiatives taken by the council was the unsuitability of the leaders' goals to the needs and demands of the rural masses. But the local leaders claimed that its power was curtailed by state government to much extent. Therefore the politics which leaders of Leh had initiated in the name of development and autonomy resulting in the formation of Hill Council proved a failure to some extent as Kashmir still dominates and interfere in both political and administrative set up of the region. On the other side, as the local council leaders were unable even to expend or disburse money under both plan and non-plan district development budget^{viii}. Also the lack of knowledge, skill and proficiency in the councilors seems to have become a hindrance in the task of organizing the local demands of the local people and to incorporate them in the overall district planning. But despite the people's dissatisfaction with the council's performance, leaders have been able to convince them that its weakness only lies in the limited autonomy provided to the council and not in stakeholders themselves.

So many has expressed and even written about the restraints in the exercise of administrative authority of the Hill Council but very few have questioned the proficiency of the Hill Council in catering to the local needs and demands. For instance the conflict between the state government and the Hill Council has many a time been highlighted by the consecutive CECs of LAHDC Leh. It is said that the problem stems from the confusion in control over the officers at different level in the local administration and happens when there are different parties in power at state and Council level^{ix}. Therefore arguing for the need of empowering the Council, LAHDC demanded the elevation of the status of the Chief Executive Councilor and other Executive Councilors to the equal rank of Cabinet Minister and Minister of States respectively. However on the one hand this demand is being viewed as not less than a demand

for a state within state and it creates sense of dismay to those who speaks for an integrated state of Jammu and Kashmir. Such apprehension got reflected in an article written by Abdul Hamid Mir in "Kashmir Images" newspaper. He opined that the state government should think before further empowering the LAHDC if the integrity of the state is to be maintained^x. On the other hand such issues not only become an argument in favour of demanding further autonomy to the Council as claimed by the leaders but also being alleged as a sole hurdle in the development process to cover the possible inefficiency and inability in the council's own part. The inability of the Hill Council to expend the money dispensed under both plan and no-plan district development fund coming from the state government is often been criticized by the people. Moreover the lack of understanding, skill and proficiency in the councilors seems to have become a hindrance in the task of organizing the local demands of the village people and incorporate them in the overall district planning. So, before demanding further autonomy the improvement in the councils working seems more important and needed primarily.

POLITICS OF UT DEMAND

In their run up for assembly and parliamentary elections, leaders have been using the rhetoric of some big political agendas like UT status. But this demand has become complicated due to contradictory perceptions within and outside the region. Taking UT as a long standing demand has never been able to make a comprehensive demand of Ladakh as a whole region^{xi}. One reason behind this is the failure on the part of leaders of Leh district in winning the confidence and support of the leaders and people of Kargil district who always apprehended Buddhist majority-Leh's domination over the Muslim majority-Kargil district as a possible consequence of conferring UT status to Ladakh. Therefore according to Rekha Chowdhary in Ladakh any kind of demand tends to be politicized either as Buddhist Leh's demand or Muslim Kargil's demand. She thinks that UT has remained merely a demand of Leh Buddhist rather than a complete demand of Ladakh as a whole^{xii}. Though argument in favour of UT for Ladakh can be considered justified but it cannot be viewed as a panacea for all the small problems region faces as a consequence of the failure on the part of the leaders of the region. Moreover conferring UT status for Ladakh not only confronts with contradictions within the region but for making it more difficult and complicated; opposition from outside Ladakh seems started cropping up in the state now. It clearly got revealed in a statement made by M Y Tarigami-state secretary of CPI(M) reported by India TV

News on 18 April 2014. Opposing UT demand he said that the demand is a move toward fragmenting the state and it dilutes state's special status guaranteed under the Indian constitution. So the agenda of UT has not reached such a stage and it neither seems pragmatic nor appropriate for any political party to make it an election promise and it is something that is more likely to remain just an election manifesto to garner vote given its bleak prospect under the very complicated and confused status of the state's autonomy politics.

POLITICS AROUND DIVISIONAL STATUS DEMAND

The demand for divisional status is also a long standing demand but remained a lukewarm or seems to have failed to catch the attention of the people of the region not as that of the UT demand. It is very interesting that the advocacy for the demand of divisional status for Ladakh comes from none other than the leaders who have reservation for UT demand- a political reason. So the debate juxtaposing UT and Divisional Status demands has taken a political shape revealed in some articles on both the perceptive in counter as well as defence published in newspapers^{xiii}. Leaving aside the arguments placed in favour of or against the UT or Divisional Status it can be assumed that both the demands are not free from opposition, problem and complication. Both seem to have become publicity stunts used to garner support to the parties or to popularize the stands taken by a particular party.

PLIGHT OF PUBLIC HEALTH SECTOR

Some where it seems that all these popular demands and agendas have knowingly glossed over the fundamental development needs in the fields like public health, education, communication etc. and such issues actually needs prime focus of the political leaders. First take the public health, the health service is one of the basic amenities that must be easily available for the people, but in case of Leh it is very difficult for the people to avail medical service given the wide geographical stretch of the district. Leh district comprised of 9 blocks and 111 villages having population of 133487 as per 2011 census^{xiv} and have only one hospital, 14 Primary Health Centers, 84 Medical Aid Centers and 43 Dispensaries (3 allopathic and 40 ayurvedic)^{xv} to cater health service to the entire district. Villages are geographically scattered and it is very difficult for the people to have access to the medical services. Village aid centers may not be capable of handling the major cases of the patients so they have to rush towards capital town Leh and hardly reach there within two days. There are many

of cases of death of the patients due to delay in reaching hospital. Therefore more Primary Health Centers are needed to be established in order to prevent such unfortunate death cases by providing supplementary medical assistant to the patients while reaching hospital. The statistics of population/institution ratio i.e. 6403:1 clearly shows the deficiency of the medical institutions. Likewise Insufficiency of the doctors gets revealed by the statistics of the patient/doctor ratio and doctor/institution ratio having 6171:1 and 0.35:1 respectively^{xvi}. According to medical superintendent SNM hospital Leh the number of beds available and doctors in position in SNM is 150 and 38 respectively. There are deficiencies of structure in casualty and trauma sections and the hospital is deficient of number of equipments like Hyperbolic Oxygen Chamber, IM14R, O₂ and Gel Technology. Telemedicine is also defunct after the damage caused by 2010 flood^{xvii}. The facts and data reveal that a lot needed to be done for the improvement in the public health sector. But leaders, politicians as well as masses all seems indifferent or lack determination in highlighting such issues related to public health.

NEED OF IMPROVEMENT IN EDUCATION SECTOR

Secondly education, no one deny that the education is the prime mover of the society towards development and a vital indicator of the development. Primary education is fundamental to the human existence in this modern world of science and technology and more important than that is the secondary and higher education. Leh district had only one college, one polytechnic college, 38 higher secondary schools with only one for women and 312 middle and primary schools in 2010^{xviii}. The entire district has only one degree college with limited subject options provided for the students and the only college is also insufficient for a huge number of students eligible for the pursuance of Bachelor Degree. One of the main problems of the degree college cited by many students is the very limited subject option it provide and that according to Samina Rehman is one of the contributing factors compelling students to migrate out of Ladakh to seek college level and higher education^{xix}. Students needed to have sufficient options of modern subject combinations for their Bachelor degree and it also matters in their higher studies and employment scopes. Entire Ladakh lack technical and professional colleges, whereas district Leh have only one polytechnic college. Secondary schools are also lacking sufficient subject options because so many modern subjects are yet to be introduced in the higher secondary schools. Therefore many students are even compelled to leave the family and native place very early in their

secondary level. Lot of improvement is needed even in the education system up to secondary. According to Samina, students in Leh are still deprived of quality education at their school level and there is need of major changes in the existing system of education by improving infrastructure including good standard of libraries and laboratories and more classrooms^{xx}. A re-known educationist of Ladakh, Sonam Wangchuk, in a conversation with Reach Ladakh expressed concern over the deteriorating condition of government schools in Leh and told that the number of government schools is closing one after another. He also said that people have lost faith in government schools. These are vital issues to be given priority or problems to be redressed by the leaders in the education sector of Leh. The genuine development in the quality and system of education is the dire need of the time for Ladakh as a whole.

DISMAL STATE OF COMMUNICATION

A vital mean in the process of development of a society is the Communication. It plays very important role in the life of the people in this modern era of science and technology. People in Leh are facing major problems in transport and communication system may it be road connectivity, air service, Radio transmissions, telephone lane line, mobile network and internet connectivity. The Government has approved the Zojila tunnel project for Ladakh to have whole round the year connectivity with rest of the country. Beside this all the other problems are yet to be pressed by leaders for redress. The limited number of plane fly to Leh leading to the scarcity of air service and the consequent surge in air fare is adding to the grievances of the local people in traveling in and out of the Leh. Connectivity is indispensable for the growth and development of a society and it need to be improved imperatively.

The All India Radio Leh is the sole reliable source of information for the people of Ladakh but it has the capacity of just 10 kw and its coverage is very bleak in the far flung areas given the wide geographical extension of the district. Same is the case of the mobile and internet network which are uncertain and the service remain often down. Therefore lot of improvement is needed in the field of communication. Leaders need to give priority to the development required in the communication of the district rather than be obsessed with the bigger agendas.

CONCLUSION

The agendas like UT demand, divisional status, greater autonomy to Hill Council, construction of tunnel on Zojila pass and Rotangla etc have pre-dominated every political discussion going on among people, intellectuals, politicians

and leaders. But the genuine issues like the plight of education, public health and communication though have caught public notice are still far from bothering them. The problems related to these fields have got back seat in the list of developmental concerns. The developmental agendas have become a part of political practice in Leh-Ladakh but these are being repeatedly appeared in the political rhetorics in the same old-fashion of implicit developmental promises. In other sense the promises of development are being promulgated in the pretext of UT demand, divisional status for Ladakh, Greater autonomy to the council, Construction of tunnels on Zojila and Rotangla passes etc undervaluing or reducing the importance of primary developmental needs in the fields like public health, education and communication etc. So, in Ladakh the developmental claims are mainly appeared in the pretext of some bigger long term objectives failing to meet primary needs in field of public health, education and communication.

For long and prominently in the modern time of democratic electoral politics, the political practice in Leh-Ladakh have tended to be fashioned in a way of mobilizing people in support of some big agendas disregarding the importance of development imperatives in the primary fields. From this analysis it seems that it is much easier to mobilize people through big agendas rather than by promising development in the prominent public fields where prime focus more importantly is needed.

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