

SOCIO-RELIGIOUS TRANSFORMATION IN THE AREA OF SHAKAR-CHIKTAN BLOCK KARGIL LADAKH IN THE ERA OF LATE SHEIKH ALI AMIR

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ABSTRACT

Ladakh is a land of two major religious groups Buddhism and Islam. The followers of the religions are divided into various groups and identities, for a reason Ladakh is heterogeneous and often communal flare-ups and rigidities in the name of religion gripple normalcy .However, the divide is not the only story. This paper explores Shaikh Ali Amir's transformative impact on the Stakchey Khangral community in Kargil Ladakh. Transcending religious bias, Shaikh Ali Amir advocated for harmonious living by integrating Islamic principles with local customs. His reforms touched daily life, from rituals to environmental stewardship, fostering mutual understanding among Buddhist and Muslim communities. Shaikh Ali Amir's legacy endures through lasting behavioural changes and a collective ethos of cooperation. This study highlights the dynamic interplay of religion, culture, and social dynamics, offering insights into the possibilities of community development. This paper reflects on the power of individual agency in effecting positive change and fostering inclusive societies.

Keywords: Kargil-Ladakh, Harmony, Tabligh, Islam, Buddhism, Custom, Tradition and Coexistence

INTRODUCTION

Ladakh, a region of profound cultural and religious diversity, has historically been shaped by its strategic geographical location and complex socio-political dynamics. Comprising two main districts, Kargil and Leh, Ladakh's history is rooted in its evolution from an independent kingdom to its integration into the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir in the mid-19th century. As a meeting point of diverse cultures—Buddhist, Islamic, and, more recently, Christian—Ladakh offers a unique case study of communal interactions across centuries. Despite this history of coexistence, religious tensions have at times disrupted harmony in the region.

This paper focuses on the socio-religious transformation initiated by Sheikh Ali Amir in the Shakar-Chiktan Block of Kargil district, an area where Buddhists and Muslims have long coexisted. His reformist approach, marked by a deep understanding of Islamic jurisprudence and a respect for local customs, enabled him to mediate between these communities. Sheikh Ali Amir's life, which spanned his education in the Shia seminaries of Iraq and his return to Ladakh, demonstrates how religious leaders can play pivotal roles in bridging divides and promoting sustainable, inclusive development.

SHEIKH ALI AMIR ISLAMIC EDUCATION JOURNEY

Sheikh Ali Amir travelled to Najaf-Iraq the centre of Shia Seminaries in the year 1952 and became the first person from the area to seek Islamic teaching and became an Aalim. There is no instance of any of his forefathers who were religiously educated that influenced or attracted him towards seeking Islamic education and the family was not so known for any impressive traits among both the communities. The primary and basic education of Sheikh Ali Amir was given by Sheikh Mahdi of Chatithang Mulbekh for almost six years and later he travelled to Najaf-Iraq for formal Islamic education.

After studying in Islamic Seminary Najaf for around 15 years Sheikh returned to his native village Stakchey Khangral and started preaching Islamic ideology and ethics among the people. Initially Muslim inhabitants of the area welcomed him but later when he initiated reforms in rituals and practices which were very much influenced by Buddhist culture and practices, faced criticism and opposition among the people of his community especially the old and authoritative folk of the community as they were very much used to such practices and were against of any change and intervention. In fact, they were adamant to follow the practices of their forefathers before the advent of Islam in the area. When Sheikh was unsuccessful in his mission to eradicate ill practices, he decided to return back to Islamic Seminary Qum-Iran.

Sheikh further studied for five years and returned back to Kargil but this time instead of returning to his own native place Stakchey Khangral he decided to settle down in Kargil town. This time he

deputed non-native preachers to Stakchey Khangral to preach Islamic rule and regulation to his native folks. He started man-to-man propagation, being in Kargil town. Individuals from Stakchey Khangral who used to visit Kargil town were targeted for the prevalence of the ill practices among their community. The teachings of Sheikh through his ambassadors and himself has a great impact on youths and his mission and campaign resulted in unanimous acceptance of his teaching and ideas by the people of Stakchey Khangral and was invited back to village. Shaikh Hasan age 75 years from Hundurman, a border village in Kargil, who was a student of Shaikh Ali Amir and assisted him in preaching religion, attributed his uniqueness as compared to other Ulema of his time to Sheikh's teacher Shaheed Baqir Al Sadr, a renowned philosopher and economist in Najaf-Iraq. Sheikh Ali Amir was the only scholar from Kargil in Najaf-Iraq who attended the teachings of Shaheed Baqir Al Sadr and his influence is well manifested in the life of Sheikh Ali Amir.

There are documentary evidences which states that the inhabitants will give up all the traditional practices which are not conducive to Islamic beliefs and practices and got consent from the village heads who opposed him earlier. The Muslim community gave written undertaking that they will follow the teachings of Sheikh and will shun all sorts of ill practices which is against the philosophy of Islam. Later realising that Sheikh's propagations is not against any faith but against the ill practices and rituals prevalent, the Buddhist community of the area also gave written undertaking that they will also follow the direction of Sheikh relating to the common issues of the society.

CONTRIBUTION OF LATE SHEIKH ALI AMIR

Sheikh introduced reformatory measures but the methodology he adopted was very impressive. Instead of organizing large number of people to introduce reforms and system of living he adopted a secret missionary methodology. He used to introduce the reforms in small selected hamlets that the other hamlets were unaware of the reforms. This was done in order to avoid crowding of people and at the same time to discourage the miscreants to dilute the reformatory system. As Sheikh realised the success of his mission at grass root level, he gathered the renowned and influential people of the area and not only documented the reformatory system but also did audio recording of the event. Here we will discuss the contribution of Sheikh in various field of the society, one by one with sub headings.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

Sheikh initiated massive plantation drive of around 25 acres of land along the Kanji River in the area. He promoted afforestation at such time when there was no such scheme or idea initiated by the government. He was very much concerned of the environment as well as necessities of the people. It was very rare to find any firewood in the area as the whole area was devoid of plants and trees. It was

commonly stated that if anyone from the area of Stakchey Khangral to Heniskot need a dry twig “*Chukhul*” to bark cattle he had to travel 8 to 10 kilometres up to Samrah village to collect dry twigs.ⁱ In one of his speeches, he addressed that the collection of twigs on newly planted ones causes deforestation and it is an un-Islamic act, so afforestation and reforestation is must. Such concerns and relating the issues of the common man to the teaching of Islam was a unique approach of Sheikh which is yet not prevalent even among the preachers of the present generation. He even said that anyone who freed cattle before the advent of autumn causing harm to the cultivation and plantation is un-Islamic and disallowed and introduced penalties for those who violated the directions. In one instance when he introduced a massive plantation drive that banned freeing cattle in the village for the whole year and directed to take cattle to the grazing areas beyond the village so that the new plantation would not get harmed by the cattle, in the environmental concern he paid his great contribution in the society and irrespective of their belief, not just the Muslims but the Buddhist communities too followed his path.

CONTRIBUTION ON DEVELOPMENTAL WORKS

Shaikh has given prime importance in constructing paths for Cattle “*Ralam*” and for people “*Milam*”. The path for the cattle was 10 feet and path of the people was 06 feet. When inquired why cattle path was 10 feet which is wide enough although cattle need much less than that for a swift walk. Sheikh took into account loaded cattle and an animal with load needs at least 6 feet width and this was also not to intrude in general paths meant for man and animal and at the same time not to intrude any one's private land. Any sort of construction and plantation along both the path was strictly prohibited. There were instances narrated that standing plants and trees were uprooted by Sheikh direction that were encroached along the path demarcated. The significance of this system is still prevalent and people are still enjoying the benefits of ‘*Ralam*’ and ‘*Milam*’.

CONTRIBUTION THROUGH RELIGIOUS SERMONS

Many people were interviewed about the content of Sheikh's preaching and all unanimously responded that during religious ceremonies especially Muharram processions he put stress on social issues and on way of living. Rights of humans and animals were always a subject of his preaching. Using simple language of a layman added with immense sense of humour for which the whole area is famous and Sheikh has a superficial trait quoting varied examples. His sermons were very interesting and had ingredients for all ages and attractive to the youths.

SHEIKH ALI AMIR CONTRIBUTION AS A SOCIAL REFORMER

Sheikh was a great social reformer; a social engineer. He must be regarded as a first clergyman who encouraged girl education and schooling although the Ulemas (preachers) who returned from Islamic Seminary Najaf-Iraq were opposing girl schooling, and if not opposing they were not even encouraging. Sheikh Ali Amir was the first person in the area to admit his daughter in a government school, which inspired others to follow. Indeed, a revolutionary step that resulted in an increased female literacy rate as well as women empowerment. For the safeguard of the women section of the society, Sheikh introduced a penalty of rupees ten thousand on the family in the case of eloping of girls. Sheikh was an ardent believer of system of marriage and family life and always advocated arranged marriages so that harmony among people is enhanced.

Ishey Stanzin of around 83 years of age from Mundik village states that he was a member of the committee framed by Shaikh. Shaikh never allowed police interference in villages. Bodhkharbu being 100% Buddhist population always supported and followed Shaikh's teachings as he never allowed any sort of discrimination among the two communities. Though both communities were living in harmony but Shaikh's presence and leadership always enhanced the harmonial coexistence between the two communities. Stanzin further states that Bodhkharboo Gompa, Turu Gompa too encouraged Buddhist community to follow the system and direction of Shaikh. Shaikh initiated development in all sectors which benefited both the community but unfortunately "the flower dried before its bloom", states Stanzin. Shaikh was of very elevated character and his sermons were simple, impressive and appealing to common man irrespective of religion they follow. Shaikh initiative of afforestation of more than 25 acres along the banks of the river made the area self-sufficient of sticks to drive cattle and later sufficient firewood as well as construction materials for all the households of the area. Presently the area is so massively planted and become one of the homes for some of the wild animals. When asked whether Shaikh tried to influence conversion among the Buddhist community; Stanzin stated that he never talked of conversion and never tried to influence us rather always advocated to be a good human being. Eatables were always exchanged among the two communities and during festivities Shaikh himself used to distribute meat equally among attendees of both the communities and on no occasion surplus or shortage of food never witnessed. Ishey Stanzin talked about a landmark direction of Shaikh regarding "Mani"ⁱⁱⁱ as Shaikh ordered Muslims to do ablution before touching them. Ablution for Muslims is mandatory before touching the scripts of holy Quran and promoting sacredness of Buddhist scriptures by this direction enhanced harmony among both the communities as well as preserved it along the Muslims hamlets. He also authenticated the property distribution of Mon. Stanzin further states that both the community remained in harmony even after the Bodhkharbu episode where Holy Quran was desecrated; only due to strong harmony preached by

Shaikh in his lifetime.

Tundup Dorjey of 71 years age from Mundik village states that his father Sonam Tundup was the founder member of the committee constituted by Shaikh representing the Buddhist community of Mundik village. He states that Shaikh always advocated on education of both the community and never discriminated among the two communities and never preached supremacy of one community over other. The Ranthak-traditional flour mill remained common for both the community and dry grains used to be exchanged to Muslim relatives during festivities.

SHEIKH ALI AMIR CONTRIBUTION IN POLITICAL SPHERE

Sheikh used to appoint members of his committee on every Eid al Fitrⁱⁱⁱ. All the issues pertaining to each member area is discussed in depth and ways for resolving the issues devolved on the occasion. Members are appointed and swearing in by the members by the name of Allah for Muslim members and for Buddhist by the name of their gods that they will serve honestly and with integrity and will abide by the rules and regulation unanimously accepted by all the members of the area. The system actively continued for around 35 years and still prevalent but much distortion in many subjects. Sheikh even introduced election system for electing members but later failed. In many of his governance and system a reflection of Panchayat Raj is much evident though the system of Panchayati Raj was not even introduced in the state of Jammu and Kashmir.

Shaikh was also active in political activities and always promoted unity of action to gain maximum benefit from the public representative. He seemed to be close to National Conference and supported Munshi Habibullah thereby increased his opponents among the supporters of Kacho Mohammed Ali Khan a Congress leader. The reason behind his association with National Conference was due to the strong dominance of the party in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. He advocated flow by the wind to maximise the economic benefit for masses.

CONCLUSION

Sheikh Ali Amir's legacy in Ladakh, particularly in Shakar-Chiktan Block of kargil district, highlights the profound impact that individual agency can have in transforming societies. His reforms transcended religious divides, promoted environmental sustainability, and improved social welfare, all while respecting the region's cultural context. By linking Islamic principles with practical solutions to local challenges, Sheikh Ali Amir established a model for peaceful coexistence and sustainable development, contributing to maintaining communal harmony.

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