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Religious and Political Control Over Interfaith Couples of Leh and Ladakh

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Abstract: *The physical, emotional, and human aspects that are frequently left out of conventional geopolitical discourse are highlighted by feminist viewpoints, which rethink geopolitical analysis. In particular, it uses the Leh District in India's Jammu and Kashmir as a focus point to investigate how love and want operate as potent but underappreciated factors within geopolitical strategy. Religious tensions between Muslims and Buddhists in this area are manifested not only in territorial and political disputes but also in the control of women's bodies, especially through the regulation of interfaith marriages. In this situation, love has the subversive capacity to subvert prevailing political narratives and sectarian bounds. Community-imposed limitations, such as the forced separation of interfaith couples or their deportation from the area, limit this possibility. By means of surveys, interviews, and interactive oral histories, the study demonstrates how women in Leh manage, oppose, or even strengthen these embodied geopolitical control tactics. The study highlights the intensely personal, affective processes through which power functions in war zones and challenges the detached, masculinized gaze of traditional geopolitics by centering the analysis around the wanting and wanted body.*

Keywords: *Geopolitical Discourse, Feministic View-Point, Community Limits, Jammu & Kashmir.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Particularly in disputed areas like the Leh District of Jammu and Kashmir, this study offers a powerful feminist geopolitical explanation of how love and desire are both profoundly political activities and very personal experiences. By demonstrating how desire is both influenced by and linked to broader power systems and territorial worries, it challenges the idea that love is only irrational or apolitical, as implied by the expression "I fell in love." The ban on interfaith marriages between the Muslim minority and the Buddhist majority in Leh is a reflection of larger political anxieties, particularly those stemming from the region's tense past of demographic control, territorial disputes, and religious identity. A deep-seated fear that the body, especially the female body, is essential to the state's survival and sovereignty gives rise to the need to control "disorderly desire"—romantic or sexual interactions that transcend religious boundaries. Reproduction is closely linked to sexuality, and it is seen to be a key factor in determining demographic and electoral power. In this situation, controlling who gets married and how many kids are born turns into a subtle but effective geopolitical tactic. This dynamic is reminiscent of the instrumentalisation of women's bodies following Partition, when violence and rape were employed as means of achieving political power. This reasoning is demonstrated in modern-day Ladakh through social control, gossip, marginalization, and the manipulation of reproductive destinies rather than overt violence. The body becomes into a territory unto itself, subject to both community and governmental authority. The research demonstrates how intimate decisions are disciplined into instruments of geopolitical strategy by incorporating scholarship on love, desire, and interfaith marriage into a feminist geopolitics framework. It demonstrates that love is not free or apolitical, but rather intricately linked to the logics of territory, identity, and control. Because feminist geopolitics emphasizes that geopolitical strategies are intimately rooted in visceral, every day, and embodied experiences—particularly those defined by gender—it fundamentally reframes our understanding of territorial struggle. This method maintains that geopolitical processes involve bodies as well as boundaries and statecraft: who is included, who is left out, who is permitted to reside where, and who is permitted to love whom. Geopolitical significance permeates personal choices like who to marry and whether to have children in Jammu and Kashmir's Leh District, especially as religious identity is closely linked to population concerns in this disputed area. The necessity to preserve religious populations for electoral and territorial control is one example of how larger geopolitical imperatives influence and discipline love and desire, despite its seeming personal and impulsive nature.

The study challenges the masculinist bias in traditional geopolitics, which emphasizes national and global scales, by focusing on the body and personal life as crucial geopolitical locations, drawing on feminist theorists such as Hyndman, Dowler, and Sharp. Communities try to secure assumed national and territorial boundaries by controlling desire, particularly when it transcends religious lines. This approach is deepened by the theoretical insights of both Freud and Foucault. Freud places want in a state of repressed, unconscious lack that is ruled by the law, whereas Foucault challenges the notion of a "true" desire, contending that desire is always formed by discursive regulation and power. Therefore, rather than being essentially liberating, even acts of love and longing are intertwined with systems of confession, control, and surveillance.

In South Asia, where love, marriage, and sexuality have long been the focus of state and colonial government, the research applies these concepts. Researchers such as Stoler, Young, Nast, and Ahmed shed light on the ways in which love and desire have historically aided racial and imperial agendas, reproducing national identities as well as societal conventions. For example, Ahmed describes how heterosexual love is presented as a national obligation that plays a key role in perpetuating the ideal citizen and race. Therefore, the personal becomes inextricably political in the context of Ladakh: who one loves, marries, and has children with becomes a way to participate in—or violate—geopolitics. By exposing how these private spheres are appropriated into the logics of state power, feminist geopolitics demonstrates how love and desire are essential to the functioning of geopolitics rather than existing outside of it.

India's Bio politics, National Bodies, and Contemporary Love: This comprehensive and nuanced examination shows how, especially in the South Asian context, love, sexuality, and the body are intricately linked to national and geopolitical endeavours. In addition to causing territorial division, Nehru pointed out that the legacy of Partition caused severe psychological and emotional pain, which Krishna and others have characterized as violence that finally rests on individual bodies. The essay draws on comparative views from situations such as Northern Ireland to illustrate how demographic anxiety, or the fear of being politically outnumbered or outbred, result in population control measures like sexual governance, reproductive control, and arranged marriages. Within this framework, the bodies of women become symbolic areas that are used to police national, cultural, and religious boundaries. Feminist scholars like Veena Das, Urvashi Butalia, and Ritu Menon have demonstrated how women's bodies were used as battlefields for symbolic violence during Partition and in later sectarian conflicts like the Gujarat riots of 2002. Honor killings, forced marriages, and rape were all used to establish cultural and territorial dominance. These violent tendencies are not unique or irrational; rather, they are the result of long-standing patriarchal and colonial ideas that portray women as symbols of honor for the community and the country. As an illustration of how space, gender, and identity are intertwined in nationalist imaginaries, the destruction of the Babri Masjid is seen as an act of sexualized aggression against a feminized Hindu nation.

Commonplace conventions surrounding marriage and sexuality are more subtly expressed examples of these relationships. Inter caste and interreligious marriages are portrayed as threats to national and communal cohesiveness by scholars such as Puri, Mody, and Chowdhry. These weddings frequently lead to honor-based violence, judicial persecution, or forced family separation. The state, community, and family work together to regulate female sexuality, and courts and public institutions frequently support patriarchal standards rather than defending individual autonomy. The "arranged marriage" ideal turns into a political endeavour that upholds the perception of an Indian nation that is morally pure, masculine, and forward-thinking. Campaigns like "Love Jihad," which demonize interfaith love, stifle women's agency and desire while strengthening community identities. In the end, national worries are most strongly expressed and controlled through the body, particularly the feminine body. Women's sexuality becomes essential to upholding social order and national integrity, whether through governmental policies, cultural representations, or physical violence. By showing that the nation is a highly emotive and gendered enterprise upheld via the daily policing of love, desire, and reproduction rather than just a collection of territory and laws, this body-politic nexus undermines conventional geopolitics. Feminist geopolitics reveals how the intimate is not only political but also deeply territorial when viewed through this lens.

Hazardous Love: Modernity, Irrepressible and Impossible Love: Inter-religious marriages, especially those between Buddhists and Muslims, have become extremely politicized and socially sensitive, reflecting larger geopolitical concerns, as seen by the testimony of Nilza and others in Ladakh. Local realities sharply contrast the Indian constitution's legal protection of such relationships. State officials in Leh frequently reject interfaith marriages due to religious and social constraints, and couples who try to get married somewhere else are sometimes stopped or shunned. Modern social conventions now maintain a strict

division between communities, even though many Ladakhi families have recent histories of inter-religious kinship—more than 80 per cent of women polled had close Muslim or Buddhist relatives. This change is a reflection of a broader geopolitical strategy in which intimate relationships, family lines, and bodies are used as sites of demographic and territorial control.

This contemporary trend of enforcing religious purity in marriages has become more intense since the 1980s communal rift between Muslims and Buddhists. Intermarriages were more prevalent and generally acceptable prior to that time. These days, the expected reaction to such partnerships is frequently physical violence or forcible separation. Malkki's use of the genealogical tree metaphor is especially appropriate in this context since it implies a nationalist logic that bases identity on a single, geographically confined pedigree, making hybridity a political and symbolic threat. In order to eradicate any ambiguity or merging of identities, this nationalist movement aims to make everybody a symbol of its community's territorial claim—Buddhist bodies for Buddhist votes, Muslim bodies for Muslim votes. In this situation, desire turns into a highly controlled phenomenon that is both inevitable and natural and dangerous and subversive.

This story illustrates how nationalist and sectarian politics rely on enforcing exclusive, legible identities and policing human connections by connecting the domestic with the geopolitical. As a result, love and want stop being personal feelings and become issues of political arithmetic, social control, and territorial strategy. In order to preserve the appearance of distinct, circumscribed communities, there is pressure to "disentangle" family trees in order to remove any indication of inter-religious or inter-communal merging. This complicated terrain, where desire is formed, controlled, and mobilized by institutions of power—but occasionally erupts in ways that resist those very controls—is made easier to understand by feminist theorists like Foucault, Butler, Deleuze, and Guattari. In the end, Ladakh's lived experiences demonstrate that love is never apolitical; rather, it is a battlefield and a possible location for resistance in geopolitical space.

Historical Context: The way that religious identity, body control, and geopolitical strategy are intertwined in Ladakh demonstrates how politically charged intensely personal acts like marriage and reproduction are in the interest of territorial government. Social reforms within the Buddhist community, such as the prohibition of polyandry and primogeniture, began in the early 20th century. These measures were not only cultural changes but also calculated demographic interventions meant to make the Buddhist population more competitive with the Muslim population. The emergence of religious welfare groups like the Young Men's Buddhist Association and the Anjumans, which were founded by Sunni and Shia Muslims, accompanied these reforms, laying the groundwork for the political exploitation of religion in Ladakh.

This trend accelerated in the late 1980s when the Ladakh Buddhist Association enforced a widespread social boycott against Muslims in an effort to obtain more political independence from the state government that ruled Kashmir. This boycott restricted private life by prohibiting interfaith marriage and other forms of interreligious socialization, in addition to upsetting public and economic interactions. During the era of reconciliation following the boycott, an unwritten but widely accepted agreement was made to completely forbid Muslim-Buddhist marriage. Marriage was regulated as part of a bio political policy to maintain a demographic "balance sheet" where each religious community controlled the size of its people. In particular, women's bodies were viewed as reproductive organs, making them crucial locations for geopolitical conflict. It was believed that if a lady married outside of her religious community, her group's numerical power would be diminished and transferred to a competitor group.

These actions reveal a deeper fear of governmental and territorial authority, even while the official rationale for them focuses on maintaining cultural identity and social cohesion. The reasoning behind the monitoring of marriage and desire is that reproductive futures have a direct impact on the creation or destruction of national and electoral borders. Consequently, these more general geopolitical considerations take precedence over women's liberty. However, there are many paradoxes in this strict control over identity and desire. Any one story of religious unity or animosity is complicated by political fragmentation, which is demonstrated by factionalism within Shia Muslims, rural-urban splits, and internal schisms within the LBA. However, religious identity's lasting influence guarantees that bodies—especially women's bodies—remain at the center of the politics of belonging, especially in postcolonial nations like India where territorial boundaries were traditionally constructed along communal lines.

This perspective makes the governance of love and marriage in Ladakh a powerful illustration of what feminist geopolitics aims to reveal: how national and international anxieties about borders and identity are acted out not just in international summits or military zones but also in courtrooms, bedrooms, and family trees. Here, desire, which was previously viewed as a personal and emotional force, is subject to

political discipline, and the body is transformed into a mapped and controlled domain. Love is not apolitical nor transgressed in this setting; rather, it is shaped, limited, and even punished in accordance with the moving logics of communal competitiveness, state power, and the replication of projected national futures.

Intermarriage? Impossible! During fieldwork in Leh in the winter of 2008, the author met Aisha, a young Sunni Muslim woman, who openly shared her opinions on interfaith marriage. Although her existence was the product of a cross-religious coupling, Aisha, whose mother was originally Buddhist, agreed that such marriages should now be avoided. She ascribed this change to a greater feeling of religious identity, literacy, and religious consciousness. Other interviewees shared this sentiment, such as Faeda, an older Sunni Muslim woman, who stressed that while people were less divided and more sincere in the past, exposure to other cultures and education has stoked tensions and a greater need to maintain religious boundaries. These opinions highlight a prevalent notion in modern-day Ladakh: interfaith marriages are now more contentious and socially unacceptable because too increased literacy and religious awareness.

Throughout the interviews, the theme that interfaith marriage was once more accepted recurs. Many interviewees noted that previous generations were more accepting of religious conversion and interfaith partnerships, even in the face of strict class and caste hierarchies and practical problems. Many locals still have family relationships that transcend religious differences, and expressions like "we drank from one cup" represent a community that was once united. However, the current is characterized by more sensitive religious identification and rigid boundaries, which contrasts with the tolerance of the past. Religious endogamy is now considered as a political requirement as much as a social preference, with weddings being seen as helping to maintain population balances that have an impact on elections and geopolitics in areas like Jammu & Kashmir.

Ladakhis frequently attribute this transition to modernity and education. The emergence of exclusionary practices is attributed by some, such as Rashid and Yangchan, to a loss of innocence brought on by greater exposure and awareness. Salima and her mother are among those who see this change as a sign of "mature" modern minds that place a higher value on religious purity. Political and economic standing are also associated with this shift: weddings between members of well-known families attract more media attention and criticism than those between members of lower castes or socioeconomic backgrounds. Caste and class still influence how intermarriage is viewed and regulated, even though they may not have the same geopolitical clout as religion. For instance, women from upper-caste or wealthy families who elope over religious boundaries are frequently the subject of significant public scrutiny, while women from marginalized origins are usually disregarded.

This hierarchical rule illustrates how caste, class, and religion interact to control marriage and sexual desire in Ladakh. Nowadays, interfaith marriage are seen as unstable acts that have wider ramifications for territorial identity and communal cohesion in addition to being personal choices. Once a sign of social ties and family, marriage has evolved into a battlefield for preserving population control and defending community boundaries. This shift illustrates how bodies—particularly women's bodies—are drafted into geopolitical endeavours through the control of love and desire, reflecting a broader concern about maintaining identity in a globalized society.

The fact that love is inevitable: Ladakh love marriage stories are characterized by conflicting and evolving narratives. On the one hand, a more tolerant social fabric may have existed in the past, as many people remember that sporadic interfaith love weddings, especially between Buddhists and Muslims, were accepted. On the other side, there's also a prevalent view that love marriages are a recent occurrence, born of modernism, literacy, and youthful impulsiveness. Women like Zainab criticize modern love marriages for their instability and high divorce rate, claiming that "love-bove" didn't exist when they were young. However, there are also voices that fervently support love marriage as being more emotionally resilient and rewarding than arranged marriage, such as Sakina, who married outside of her religion in defiance of her Buddhist parents during the 1980s crisis.

Many women highlighted their personal agency in selecting mates in spite of the societal stigma, using subdued yet impactful language to describe love: "I just liked him," or "having decided for myself, I went." However, fatalistic narratives—that love is an uncontrollable force and that efforts to repress it are pointless—frequently coexist with this manifestation of agency. Mothers like Amina acknowledge that they may be against their kid getting married in a different religion, but they feel helpless to stop it. Older men talk about fate and destiny, believing that love will find a way out through the symbolic window even if a child is restricted. However, these ideas of love as powerful and inevitable are restrained by a keen understanding of the social repercussions, such as gossip in the society, family dissolution, and exclusion.

The majority of young women still indicate a preference for planned weddings, but with a crucial disclaimer: they want the ability to veto the match. Saeda is one of the minority who supports intermarriage based on friendships and personal experience. Arranged marriage is perceived as more sensible, secure, and socially approved, whereas many people view love as ephemeral and immature, connected to college crushes. This is a calculation influenced by worries about safety, prestige, and social acceptance rather than just a rejection of love.

Class, caste, gender, and geopolitics are all intricately entwined with the conversation about love and interfaith marriage. Rumors and cautionary tales frequently arouse the dread of losing "Buddhist girls" to Muslim males, framing love as perilous and intensely politicized. The aspirations of young people are portrayed as endangering demographic balances and communal boundaries, even as older generations remember their own mixed-religion grandparents. In this context, desire is not only private or emotional; rather, it becomes a strategic battlefield for societal standards, religious identity, and the regulation of women's conduct.

In the end, a complex image of desire that alternates between being romanticized, feared, controlled, and blamed is revealed. It is employed as a narrative device to uphold social divisions, reaffirm gendered norms, and mould a moral code for the next generation. In addition to being portrayed as personal decisions, love marriages—especially interfaith ones—are often portrayed as socially disruptive behaviours that call for intervention and discipline from the community. The intricate geopolitics of love and marriage in modern-day Ladakh are defined by this conflict between agency and regulation, tradition and modernization, and fate and control.

Territorial Limits to Love: This study demonstrates how territorial worries affect people's bodies and lives, particularly those of women, and reveals the close connection between geopolitics and the control of love and marriage in Ladakh. A way to control desire and enforce societal norms is through gossip about interreligious love tales, which are frequently tragic. Cross-religious love is nearly impossible within Leh's borders due to the enduring partition-era logic of counting and managing bodies, particularly through religion. Couples who violate the anti-intermarriage conventions are frequently pushed into socially acceptable unions, sent to far-off communities, or removed from family histories. Their love, which had the capacity to unite people, is now used as a warning that calls for more control and discipline.

There are many paradoxes in the discussion of interreligious love. Desire is said to be an uncontrollable force of fate, but it also needs to be repressed in order to preserve social limits. To comprehend how love becomes intertwined with geopolitical control, Foucault's theories of want as a product of power and Deleuze's idea of desire as productive are referenced. Even in cases where love does question the status quo, its potential for transgression is neutralized, either by physical exclusion from the group or by disciplinary actions that undermine the legitimacy of such partnerships. These dynamics are similar to those observed in other South Asian contexts, where both informal and formal methods are used to police and penalize inter caste or interfaith partnerships.

This control over love is strongly gendered. Sakina points out that when interfaith partnerships are broken off by force, the woman is socially condemned while the guy is largely unaffected. Leaders openly advocate for controlling Buddhist women by enforcing rules about their attire, demeanour, and education, portraying women's behaviour as essential to upholding religious bounds. Her body becomes a location of contested sovereignty, and the Buddhist girl in jeans becomes a symbol of collective vulnerability. When a marriage has already crossed the line, organizations such as the Ladakh Buddhist Association are condemned for their failure to offer constructive engagement and instead concentrating on reactionary actions.

Meanwhile, these limitations are internalized by young individuals. Their stories have love and agency, but their decisions are influenced by pragmatic considerations like religion, prestige, and reputation. Because they are more secure and socially acceptable, many people favour arranged marriages in which they maintain veto power. Under public scrutiny, interfaith partnerships become unsustainable and love is reduced to a childlike emotion.

The geopolitical disciplining of love eliminates the potential for kinship-based unity and strengthens religious uniformity. Elders like Lila remember a time when interfaith unions strengthened family ties and deterred violence, but this recollection stands in stark contrast to the current situation. Young people with mixed background, like Aisha and Saeda, believe that these kinds of partnerships are no longer acceptable. Even if a transgressed couple stays together in this environment, their love is unable to fulfil the integrative political role it formerly may have. Instead of being exiled or silenced, these spouses are included in a warning story that increases control.

Finally, although love has the potential to be a counter-geopolitical force, regulatory policies have snatched it up and diverted it. Desire is tamed as a result, disciplining bodies, erasing dissent, and upholding social boundaries. Cross-religious love no longer fosters unity in Ladakh's confined social space; rather, it emphasizes the price of disobedience and the ability of geopolitics to influence the most private facets of human existence.

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