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Envisioning Ladakh's future as UT



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The Chang La pass in Ladakh in a 2012 photo.

Will a greater centralisation of decision-making help the region's already-fragile terrain?

Amidst the babble of voices on the sudden abrogation of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K)'s special constitutional status, the simultaneous transformation of Ladakh into a Union Territory (UT) has not received much attention. During last week's parliamentary debate on this decision, Ladakh's Member of Parliament Jamyang Tsering Namgyal argued powerfully that Ladakhis had been demanding UT status for the region for many decades. Finally achieving it, he said, will enable the region to achieve its full development potential. But are the prospects for his constituency that clear?

For decades, a substantial part of Ladakh (specifically, Leh district) has felt stifled or alienated by J&K's decision-making apparatus, which was centred in Srinagar. The J&K government has often been insensitive to the region's ecological and cultural uniqueness, whose incredible beauty masks the extreme fragility of its cold desert ecosystems and the highly adaptive traditional livelihoods of its people. These are so unlike the topography of the rest of India that people from other parts of the country cannot even understand them.

Pressure on ecology

This landscape has found it difficult to weather the pressure being put by the infrastructure projects, the presence of armed forces and excessive tourism. Further, these activities, and the inappropriate educational systems foisted on Ladakhis, have disrupted the lifestyles of the region's traditional ethnic groups. The bifurcation of Ladakh, which was once a single district, into Leh and Kargil, clearly on religious grounds, has also been seen by many local people to have driven an unnecessarily divisive wedge between Buddhist and Muslim populations.

Given the above factors, the demand to make Ladakh a UT appears to have been backed by strong reasoning. One can wonder, though, why the demand was not for a separate State, or at least, for a territory having its own legislature, for

there is little evidence to suggest that coming under the direct control of the Central government will signal greater autonomy for the region. The way New Delhi has treated Andaman and Nicobar Islands, largely ignoring its ecological fragility and the sensitivities of its indigenous peoples, does not inspire much confidence. Moreover, the aggressive Hindu nationalist agenda of the current Central regime could only pose more challenges to Ladakh.

Being home to enormous mineral reserves and tourism sites, Ladakh could easily find itself getting exploited by commercial interests even more once its economy is opened. This would only put greater pressure on its already fragile ecosystem, and consequently impact the mores of its pastoral and agricultural communities that are dependent on it. The region has already been facing environmental issues due to landslips, soil erosion, accumulation of solid waste, disturbances to its wildlife population and diversion of commons for development projects.

More infrastructure projects

However, the J&K government's financial and administrative ability to scale such activities up was extremely limited. The Central government, not constrained by such fetters, may press ahead with more hydropower, mining and road construction programmes, making sensitive areas more vulnerable.

The third danger to the region will possibly come from an increased presence of the armed forces. Given the importance the present government attaches to threats, real and perceived, coming from China and Pakistan, the likelihood of more personnel getting stationed is high. Thousands of hectares of pasture land have already been occupied by the forces, with disruptive consequences for wildlife and local communities. The Army is yet to give us an accurate figure on how much of the region's land has been diverted for use by its personnel.

Ladakh has had its own Autonomous Hill Development Council for more than two decades. However, during a study trip in March this year, we learned from

political functionaries, activists and civil society members that there was, on the ground, no true autonomy. Decisions were mostly made from Srinagar and, to some extent, New Delhi.

This is not to say that had Ladakh been given greater autonomy, it would necessarily have chosen a different path; sections of the region's mainstream do aspire for greater 'development'. But we need to stress here that many sections of Ladakh's society also have a different vision for its future. This includes civil society groups such as the Students' Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh; the Snow Leopard Conservancy India Trust; the Ladakh Arts and Media Organisation; and the Ladakh Ecological Development Group. These groups have done innovative work on various fronts – including education; ecotourism; and arts. With power receding further away from the region and now firmly resting in New Delhi, their voices are likely to be heard even less.

Need for a sensitive plan

A Ladakh 2025 Vision document, formulated in 2005 after substantial consultation, was shelved both because the Hill Council did not push it, and because Srinagar and New Delhi were not interested. The plan contained several innovative proposals to address the needs and aspirations of Ladakh's population, including by providing sustainable livelihoods for its rural people and youth. How will the state of affairs in Ladakh change now with its new constitutional status? Without its own legislature, the region will have only limited power; further, it is not clear if its Hill Council will continue. A lot will depend on what vision New Delhi and Leh can jointly come up with.

In March, when we met Mr. Namgyal, who was then heading the Hill Council, we found him sensitive to the ecological and cultural issues the region faces. He had just brought out a draft for a mission on ecological farming and sounded receptive towards an alternative vision I proposed through a presentation.

Will he and others around him, through whom New Delhi's decisions will be channelled, be willing and able to mould the proposals to suit the region's requirements? Will they revive the Vision 2025 document, updating it if

necessary? Will Ladakh's farmers, pastoralists, women and youth get a more meaningful voice in the new dispensation than they have had so far within the Hill Council status, or will they be marginalised even further? And even if they do get a voice, will they opt for a sustainable, culturally rooted future? For the sake of one of the world's most remarkable bio-cultural landscapes, let us hope so.

Ashish Kothari is with Kalpavriksh, Pune

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MF

Mohammad Fida 3y

The era of national states communist states narrow religious fundamentalist states is gone away. Now is the global era all over the 'village world'. Now he/she, you, me: everyone is to act alike all over the globe. Means the old 'civics' that we used to learn in school is dead upon

the demise of the bipolar world as the new village world has given birth to 'new civics'. Hereunder One in Bombay shall act as the one in Oslo, Frankfurt, London, Islamabad, Cairo, would so the village world may operate for peace coexistence codependence & profitability. Ashish Kothari has worked hard on Ladakh; known to us & to UN since 1948 when Indo-Pak had fought its first war on Kashmir. Means you got to put Ladakh on the anvil with the spirit of global order not 'Ram' ridden 'Raj'! It needs consent of the neighbourhood to move even a brick in the area of "conflict" as the 'new civics' demands on us to act as it should be, must be, and ought to be acted upon under the dictates of this new era.

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NM

Nirav Majithia 3y

The gist of the article is as follows:

Ladakh was better off being a part of the state of Jammu & Kashmir. The Muftis and Abdullahs were far more concerned and worried about the ecological sensitivity of the region and the aspirations of Ladakhis than the Modi govt could ever be.

The ironic part is the erudite author is absolutely convinced about his predictions. He is sure that New Delhi will be worse for the Ladakhis than Srinagar. Also, the civil society of Ladakh is at loggerheads with the "section" of Ladakhis who wish to be a part of the mainstream and benefit from the economic resurgence of the nation.



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AD

Anirban Deb 3y

Good journalism. The different voices of Ladakh, which were not obvious from the speech of a single mp, become clear by reading this.



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PP

Peter Peter 3y

The bocev of overdevelopment is iust that. A bocev. If anything , Ladakh

has suffered from neglect. The two families from the Kashmir valley, who have dominated the political scene in J&K, have not only neglected Leh Ladakh for 50 years, but siphoned off all the money that was given by the center for its development. Ladakh got its first University only after the Modi govt. came to power. What was the reason that it took 65 years before this could be done? Mr. Kothari, as is the wont of many so called "intellectuals", is needlessly creating issues, where there are none. Please be patient and see how this government takes care of this fledgeling state.

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J

Jawad 3y

Lacks the voices of civil societies from Kargil District

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1U

123 undefined 3y

How is Hindu Nationalism bad? Why we shouldn't be aggressive? Should Hindus be meek and be a carpet for everyone to walkover? The greatest enemy of Hindus are us Hindus only.

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JA

Jackson and Jacksons 3y

Briefly in few words or a mere sentence:

Why is there unrest only in the whole of Gulf and Middle East for decades together? Because of vested interest in access, custody and control of natural resource!

The same applies and is true with Article 370, 371 and 35A, which obstructs such vested interests from having a share in "the heaven on earth".....!!!

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