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Ladakh, a fragile region, needs autonomy

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A constitutional status that enables locally determined pathways can help avoid the disastrous track that many other parts of India have tread

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Sonam Wangchuk does yoga on the third day of his five-day climate fast in Phyang, Ladakh. | Photo Credit: PTI

The normally peaceful residents of Ladakh are in agitation mode. They are set to gather in Delhi today to pursue their demand for special constitutional status, which would allow them to decide on a development path

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that safeguards the region's fragile ecological and cultural heritage.

Editorial | **Fire and ice: On Ladakh**

On January 26, one of Ladakh's most respected educationists and inventors, Sonam Wangchuk, began a fast in the open in sub-zero temperatures. He issued an appeal to Prime Minister Narendra Modi to meet this demand. On January 31, Leh held perhaps its largest-ever demonstration with over 20,000 people. Two weeks before this, the Leh Apex Body and the Kargil Democratic Alliance, two of Ladakh's most powerful religious and political organisations, rejected a committee set up by the Central government to examine the status issue. They said the committee's mandate was vague and did not consider the specific demands made by them. Student groups and civil society groups too have ramped up their demand for constitutional safeguards.

A fragile ecosystem

Why are the people of Ladakh dissatisfied with the region's status as a Union Territory (UT)? After all, Ladakhis had been demanding UT status for many years, and when it was announced in 2019 by the Centre, there had been celebrations across the region.

Since 2019, the celebratory mood has considerably diminished. Many Ladakhis have realised that their real need of relatively free and autonomous functioning and substantial local employment generation is still a mirage. For 1,000 years, Ladakh was an independent kingdom before being integrated into Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). The memory of this

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long history has not been erased, and it rankles that while it is no longer subject to J&K, Ladakh is now being ruled from New Delhi.

In 2019, the BJP government had announced that Ladakh would get special constitutional status providing it autonomy. Before the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (AHDC) election, Sixth Schedule status was promised to the region, similar to what is seen in some parts of north-east India. This promise is yet to be fulfilled. The Home Minister has rebuffed senior Ladakhi politicians and activists who have approached him on this.

It is important to understand the sensitivity of Ladakh. The region's cold desert ecosystems harbour rare mammals like the wild yak and the snow leopard, and diverse flora. Cultures and livelihoods have evolved to be sensitive to the fragility of ecosystems that cannot bear heavy human activity. High-altitude pastoralism, agriculture, and trade have been the mainstays of Ladakhi economy and society for centuries.

Who is Sonam and why did he mate fast'?

Administrators sitting in or appointed from Delhi hardly comprehend what can and cannot work in such a landscape. Ladakh is already groaning under infrastructure development, intense armed forces presence, and excessive tourism. Since Ladakh became a UT, there is even more focus on an exploitative 'development' path. There is enormous commercial interest for mining, tourism, hydropower, and other natural resources. The UT administration has been inviting investments in the region, and India's biggest corporations are showing interest. A new airport is under construction, and road

construction, including into the relatively unexploited Zaskar region, has been ramped up. Ladakh already faces serious problems of landslides, erosion, solid waste and effluents, disturbance to wildlife, and cordoning off common lands for development projects. In the name of a 'carbon-neutral' Ladakh, mega-solar projects are in the offing; the 2023 Budget has allocated ₹20,000 crore for solar power evacuation and grid integration from a project of 13GW in the ecologically fragile Changthang region.

Since 1995, Ladakh has had an AHDC with the aim of enabling locally determined development. However, a study by Kalpavriksh in 2019 showed that decision-making was mostly dominated by Srinagar and Delhi. Exceptions showed the potential of autonomy; in 2005, the HDC with civil society groups came up with an innovative Ladakh 2025 Vision Document. Unfortunately, it remained in cold storage due to political and financial constraints. Now, the UT administration is commissioning similar documents to consultancy agencies from outside Ladakh, as if local people don't have enough expertise.

Working together

There are opportunities for Ladakh and Delhi to work together. A Hill Council decision for Ladakh agriculture to become fully organic could be backed by the Central government (for instance, by requiring the armed forces to purchase locally grown and made items). Communities could be aided to claim and operationalise collective rights over grasslands using the Forest Rights Act. Tourism could be fully oriented towards community-run, ecologically sensitive visitation.

Ladakhi civil society organisations and some government departments are already implementing amazing initiatives for livelihoods sensitive to the area's ecology, decentralised solar energy use, sustaining the food and agricultural heritage, entrepreneurship, and much else. But if the Central government (and some of Ladakh's own people) continue with the present mindset, all this will amount to nothing. A constitutional status that enables locally determined pathways, driven by a sensitive local population, can help avoid the disastrous track that many other parts of India have tread.

Ashish Kothari works with the environmental action group Kalpavriksh, Pune. Views are his own

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