

Ladakh's mass agitation heats a cold desert

India's northernmost region is demanding constitutional safeguards

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Tsomo Riri high altitude lake, Ladakh - a fabulously unique landscape @ Ashish Kothari

On 3rd February, India's northernmost region Ladakh, bordering Tibet, saw its biggest-ever demonstration, and a complete shutdown. Over 20,000 people gathered in the district headquarters of Leh and Kargil, to make four key demands. First, they want full statehood for Ladakh, which would upgrade it from its current status as a Union Territory, decentralizing political power from New Delhi to Leh and Kargil. Second, inclusion in the sixth schedule of the Constitution of India, which is currently for tribal areas in north-east India, and enables the setting up of autonomous regional councils. Third, job reservations for local people in government and other programmes are put in place there. And fourth, a parliamentary seat each for Leh and Kargil, enabling the region to send two Members to the national parliament (currently there is only one).

About a year back in January 2023, Ladakh had witnessed a similar mass rally, based on long-simmering discontent and triggered by a hunger fast by local inventor, educationist, and environmentalist Sonam Wangchuk. People of the region have waited a year for the Indian government to respond positively to the

demands but in vain. So they have risen again, and the timing is even more significant now, as India's national elections are coming up in a couple of months, with the party in power in Delhi (the Bharatiya Janata Party or BJP) hoping to retain its rule. BJP also has Ladakh's only parliamentary seat.

Why are Ladakhis agitating?

Ladakh is part of the 'roof of the world', the same landscape as Tibet, with spectacular cold desert and high-altitude lake landscapes. Of the two districts it contains, Leh is predominantly Buddhist, and Kargil (bordering Pakistan) mainly Muslim. The region contains several unique cultures. Its economy has traditionally been based on a high incidence of nomadic pastoralism (including in some of the world's highest pastures), trade, and agriculture. In the last couple of decades, it has also seen an explosion in tourism. It is also occasionally in the news for skirmishes on its border with Tibet (occupied by China).

Ladakh does not have much of a history of people's protest movements. But in the last few years, its residents have been getting increasingly agitated by some heavy-handed, insensitive treatment by the central government.

In 2019, as part of its abolition of Jammu and Kashmir's special constitutional status (given to it when its then ruler decided to join the Indian Union subsequent to the India-Pakistan partition in 1947), New Delhi granted Union Territory (UT) status to Ladakh. Residents of Leh district celebrated, for it has been a long-standing demand to be freed from J&K state, within which Ladakh was only a district and felt neglected. Residents of Kargil district were not so thrilled, as they preferred staying within the J&K state rather than being ruled from New Delhi. Within a short time, however, even Leh district's residents realized that the new-found freedom was short-lived, as some perceptive residents and [observers had feared](#). One distant ruler had been replaced by another, even further away, perhaps even more insensitive. The central government placed a Lt. Governor (a colonial designation India still uses!) in charge, and appointed officials in the UT Administration, most of whom are from outside Ladakh and have little previous knowledge of or sensitivity towards Ladakh's unique ecological-cultural-political attributes.

The Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council, set up in 1995 under a special law as a locally elected body which was supposed to give residents an effective mechanism for self-governance, had had little meaningful power under the J&K State. Now under the UT status, it seems to have even less. Much of the expenditure under the INR 60,000 million annual budget for Ladakh is decided by the UT Administration; according to several Council members and civil society groups, there is mostly token consultation regarding budget priorities. Village assemblies, self-governed through the [traditional goba \(headman\)](#) and yulpa (village assembly) system combined with the more recently introduced panchayat (village council) system, are not in the picture at all. When it took the drastic step of reducing J&K state's constitutional status and splitting Ladakh away from it, the central

government had promised to grant it 6th Schedule status. This was backed by a strong recommendation from the National Commission on Scheduled Tribes. But it remains an unfulfilled promise.

Of particular concern is that effective local control over land use, though nominally still the Hill Council's prerogative, has gone into the hands of the UT Administration (effectively in the hands of the central government). There are legitimate fears of land being grabbed by outsiders for tourism, industrial, mining, mega-energy, hydroelectricity, and other projects. Not that all such projects are unwelcome for a region that needs livelihood opportunities, but residents ask: how sustainable are these, who controls them, and for whose benefit? A proposed Ladakh Industrial Land Allotment Policy 2023, has [raised hackles](#) because all of the 'single window clearance' committees in it have only government officials and industry representatives – no Hill Council members, no civil society groups, no panchayat (village council) representatives. The document does not even lay out environmental or cultural criteria for considering an industrial project, nor any public consultation. However, it mentions 'sustainable industrialization' (without defining it) and prioritises local entrepreneurs.

Shockingly, and also causing anger amongst locals, most of the perspective plans or policy proposals in the last few years have been drafted by non-Ladakhi consultants hired by the UT Administration. This includes a vision plan for 2050, commissioned to Ernst and Young. This is seen as highly insulting to the expertise and experience of Ladakhis themselves.

Mixed policy signals

Not all of what the UT Administration proposes or supports is problematic, of course. In 2019 the Hill Council announced a decision to make Ladakh's agriculture completely organic by 2025. The decision itself has been welcomed, but its implementation status is unclear. A proposed Tourism Policy has useful recommendations to work out Ladakh's carrying capacity and regulate tourist flows accordingly, but it is not clear who will carry out this study, and how its recommendations will be implemented. Actual expenditure and actions to promote mass tourism, already booming in an unregulated manner, are being taken up even as the policy is under consideration. For instance, a new airport is under construction, with a projected capacity of two million tourists (six times the resident population of Ladakh!).

In 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that Ladakh will be India's first carbon-neutral region. The roadmap for this is unclear. There is no recognition that Ladakh is actually already carbon-neutral, perhaps even carbon-negative, given how much its vast territory probably already soaks up carbon and how its pastoral-agricultural-trade based living has made virtually no contribution to global warming. Indeed, 'development' projects that the central government is conjuring up for the region are adding significantly to climate stress, including the enhanced air traffic the new airport will bring in, and a series of highways with enormous

black soot potential. Ironically, a mega-solar project that is supposed to be part of the announced carbon neutrality, is proposed to be located over 20,000 acres in the ecologically fragile Changthang area (immediately bordering Tibet), home to the region's nomadic pastoralists and unique wildlife.

There is also concern about right-wing religious entities pursuing a programme of imposing India's majority religion, Hinduism, encouraged by the central government. Early indications of this are already causing tension in a region that has a majority Muslim (Kargil) or Buddhist (Leh) population. In 2021 the Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) had to vehemently protest the attempted conversion of an annual inter-faith Sindhu (Indus River) festival into a Hindu-dominated Mahakumbh (mass religious festival).

The promise of constitutional safeguards

Statehood and 6th Schedule status (which provides for regional self-governance institutions, currently operational in Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram), could help safeguard Ladakh's land and fragile environment, unique culture, and traditional governance system combined with new ones like panchayats. It could help orient tourism and infrastructure development in sensitive ways, and help create an educational system that combines local roots with outside learning. It could provide powers to the Hill Council that it currently lacks. It may also help resolve the oft-simmering religious tension between Leh and Kargil districts. In fact, the current agitation has brought together the Leh Apex Body and Kargil Democratic Alliance, leaving behind their earlier disagreements such as whether to remain in J&K state or not. Hopefully, this is a precursor to longer-term co-existence. LBA President Thupstan Chhewang, one of the current movement's leaders, has played a seminal role in bringing them together.

Also worth considering is providing Ladakh with the status of a Schedule 5 region under the Constitution (meant for predominantly tribal regions like Ladakh), which accords strong legal powers to its village assemblies. Along with this, it would be important to fully implement the Forest Rights Act 2006 which recognizes the collective rights of village communities over forest land or, more relevant for Ladakh as a desert/grassland landscape, over land within national parks and wildlife sanctuaries. These were recommended by over 80 civil society organizations of the [Vikalp Sangam \(Alternatives Confluence\)](#) process in response to the Ladakhi agitation of 2023.

But it should also be stressed that simply getting statehood and special constitutional status will not automatically lead to pathways of justice and sustainability. Ladakhis have to build their own capacities and visions for ecologically and culturally sensitive governance, otherwise, the potential of such a status will remain on paper. This will be a challenge, not least because short-term profit-making has entered many Ladakhi mindsets too, as seen in the mad hotel construction boom in Leh town.

Possibly alarmed by the repeated shows of people’s strength in Ladakh, the central government has sought meetings with key leaders of the agitation. But in at least two meetings in February, there has been no breakthrough. Discussions are ongoing, but is there light at the end of the tunnel? The central government has been busy dismantling India’s federal nature of governance by centralizing many powers, and Ladakh may be too small an irritant to bother about. Meanwhile, inventor-educationist Sonam Wangchuk has gone on a ‘fast unto death’ (an approach made famous by Mahatma Gandhi during India’s struggle for independence) to highlight the demands. Ladakhi patience is running out, and an increasingly angry mass movement is generating plenty of heat, possibly enough to counter the sub-zero temperatures of winter.

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