

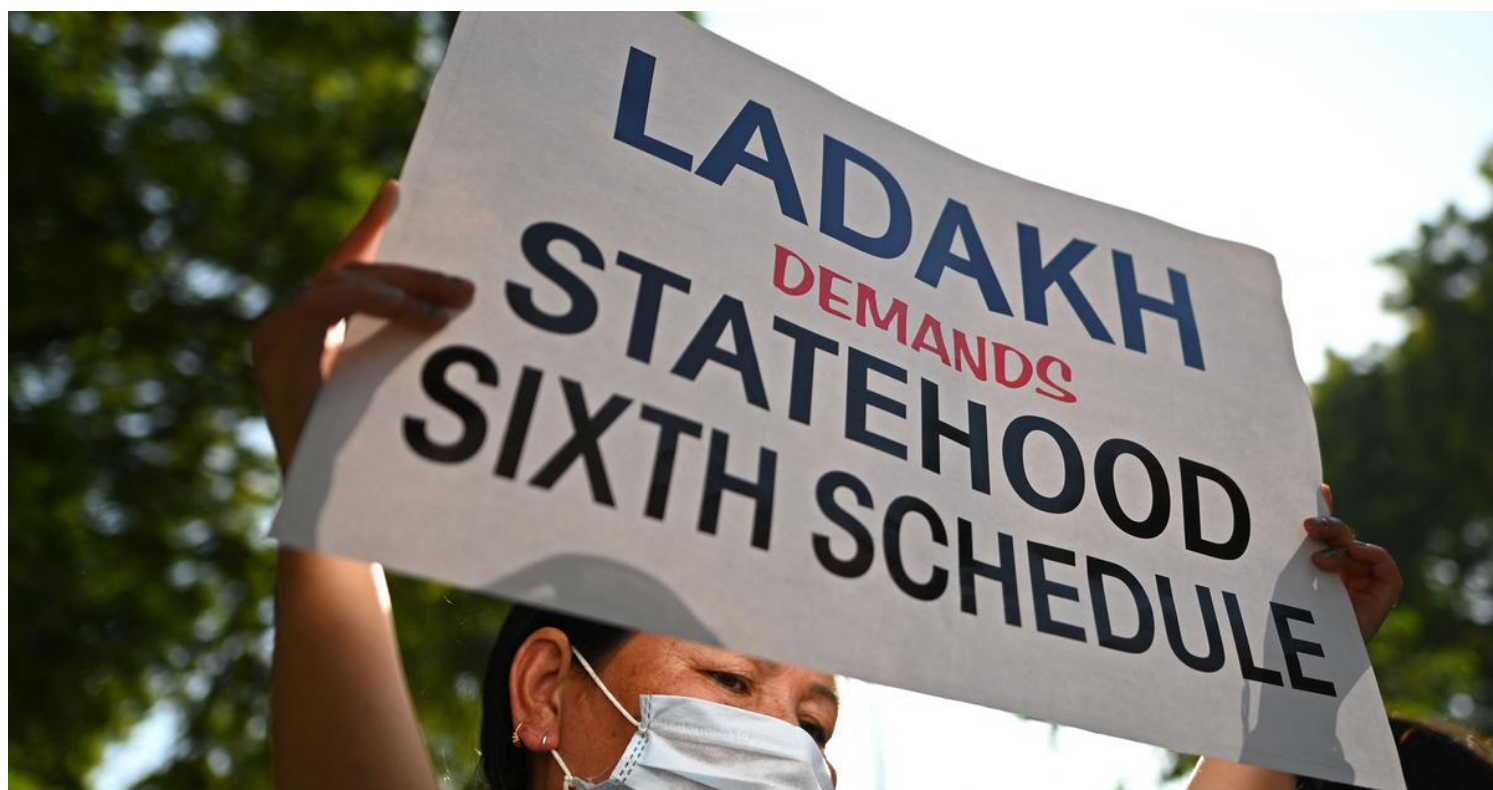
## ENVIRONMENT

# With no guarantee of autonomy, sub-zero Ladakh will continue to boil

Fresh notifications in June address some concerns but there is no clarity over whether Ladakhis will get to decide how their land and resources are to be used.

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A protest in New Delhi on February 2023. | Sajjad Hussain / AFP

Early in June, the Indian government issued four notifications aimed at providing improved employment and cultural security to Ladakh, the country's northernmost region.

A high-altitude desert, Ladakh is ecologically and culturally fragile, and geopolitically strategic, sharing borders with Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and China-occupied Tibet.

Since at least 2023, the residents of Ladakh have been [demanding legal safeguards](#) as per the Constitution that would grant them autonomy in governing the region in tune with its unique cultural and ecological conditions, and ensure they get dignified livelihoods.

The [June notifications](#) addressed some of these key demands.

One provides for employment reservation of up to 85% for Ladakhis, excluding the 10% reservation for economically weaker sections. The total of up to 95% reservation is amongst the highest in India.

A second notification specifies that to obtain a “domicile certificate”, one has to already have a resident certificate, or have resided in Ladakh for 15 years after 2019. Such a certificate enables, amongst other things, access to job reservations. This means that non-Ladakhis will be ineligible for the next several years.

A third notification reserves 33% seats on the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Councils for women. The fourth specifies that for official purposes, the following languages must be used: English, Hindi, Urdu, Bhoti and Purgi, and that the Ladakh Administration should promote the local languages Shina (Dardic), Brokskat (Dardic), Balti and Ladakhi.





A rally demanding sixth schedule status for Ladakh, in Leh in January 2023. Credit: Karma Sonam, courtesy Ashish Kothari.

Though these notifications are progressive in essence and follow several years of public pressure, several concerns persist.

For instance, the language of the job reservation notification – “the total percentage of reservation shall in no case exceed 85%” – leaves open the possibility that more than 15% of jobs can be filled by outside workers.

More importantly, there is no guarantee that the most powerful administrative posts will be filled by Ladakhis, unless the domicile provision is applicable.

For instance, in the Union Territory’s administration, all but one secretary-level posts have, so far, been held by non-Ladakhis. These officials, who come with experience from regions that vastly differ from Ladakh and struggle to understand this high-altitude desert ecosystem and its associated cultures and livelihoods, often end up imposing their own alien visions of development and welfare.

There is also suspicion that these notifications are a diversion from the core issues that Ladakhis have been raising. Several protests have focused on the demand for constitutional safeguards, in the form of recognition under the [Sixth Schedule](#), and statehood.

The Sixth Schedule of the Constitution guarantees protection to land and a degree of autonomy for the country’s tribal areas.

When the region was bifurcated from the former state of Jammu and Kashmir in 2019 after the abrogation of its special status, it was granted Union Territory status. Initially, the mood was celebratory since Union Territory status had been a long-standing demand to free Ladakh from Srinagar’s control.

But soon Ladakhis realised that the centre of power had merely shifted to New Delhi and that under the new regime – headed by the lieutenant governor appointed by the Centre – Ladakhi institutions, including the elected Hill Council, had even less power than before.



At the heart of this is constitutional status under the Sixth Schedule – which the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party had included as its first promise in the 2020 Hill Council elections – that will enable Ladakhis to safeguard their customary and traditional institutions, culture, ecology-based livelihoods – and especially land.



On the banks of the Tso moriri mountain lake. Credit: Ashish Kothari.

With no movement on this from New Delhi, Ladakhis have repeatedly held protests, the latest being a march on foot from Leh to Delhi in September 2024. The Centre had then promised talks to consider the demands.

Now, however, it is clear that the Centre does not want to recognise Ladakh's autonomy, at a time when it is intent on weakening India's federal structure, reducing the constitutional powers that states have.

Centralising power is one motivation, while the other appears to be access to land and natural resources, both essential for the profit-making of corporations that have close ties with the ruling party and its allies.

Having seen what is happening in other parts of India, Ladakhis fear losing control over their homeland. They have seen how decisions continue to be taken by the Union Territory's administration that undermine local capacity and expertise.

For instance, envisioning Ladakh's development has been contracted to outside agencies, including multinational corporations like Ernst and Young, while infrastructure contracts have been given to companies based outside the region. There is a centralisation of decisions about land in the hands of the district commissioner. The domicile notification does not, in any way, guarantee that such processes will be in the hands of Ladakhis, even if local expertise and capacity may exist.



Indus river in Ladakh. Credit: Ashish Kothari.

Importantly, Sixth Schedule or statehood status is not by itself a guarantee that Ladakh's process of development will be sensitive to its culture, livelihoods and ecology. Similar motivations were at the heart of the people's movements that led to the formation of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Uttarakhand. But the subsequent failure of imagination about what a local culture and ecology-sensitive process of development could look like, coupled with electoral politics, corruption and



other forces, have undermined much of those intentions.

What is to keep Ladakh from going in the same direction, especially as it will have to generate a lot of its own resources? The frenzy of construction by Ladakhis in Leh, for what are clearly short-term profits from tourism, raises such a question.

This is a concern that local leaders are well aware of – like Chhering Dorjay Lakruk, vice-chair of the Apex Body, one of the two regional organisations spearheading the movement – the other being Kargil Democratic Alliance.

Lakruk has said that since ecology, including climate, and culture have been at the core of their demands, the hope is that these will form the foundation of their vision for an autonomous Ladakh. Climate activist Sonam Wangchuk and several Ladakhi youth involved in the agitation, have said the same.

In any case, these visions can only be put to the test if and when the constitutional status of autonomy is recognised.

For too many years, the time and energy of Ladakhis have been wasted having to demand their most fundamental rights. This is not of benefit to either Ladakh or the rest of the subcontinent, given that the region is part of the largest freshwater reservoirs that hundreds of millions of people depend on, and that it is in one of India's most geopolitically sensitive areas

But if the Centre continues to sidestep the main issue of autonomy and self-governance, the geopolitically important and climate-sensitive region will continue to be on the boil, even in the sub-zero temperatures of the highest plateau of India.

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