

LOCAL GOVERNANCE

Why is the Centre dragging its feet on autonomy for Ladakh?

By cancelling the land lease of Sonam Wangchuk's institute, which has supported local livelihoods, New Delhi will continue suppressing the region's demands.

Ashish Kothari

5 hours ago

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Sonam Wangchuk speaks at a protest demanding statehood for Ladakh, in New Delhi in February 2023. | AFP

The Ladakh administration's decision on August 21 to revoke the land lease of the Himalayan Institute of Alternative Learning is the latest of a series of moves aimed at suppressing a people demanding constitutional autonomy and self-governance.

Set up in 2018 by the entrepreneur-environmentalist Sonam Wangchuk, HIAL has been a hub of innovation in construction design, technology, livelihoods, and education. It has enabled Ladakhi and Himalayan youth to learn skills that they can use to create dignified livelihoods in the mountains, rather than having to migrate out of the region.

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To understand the context of this development, it is necessary to consider events that have unfolded since 2019, when the Indian government separated the district of Ladakh from Jammu and Kashmir and granted it Union territory status. This had been a long-standing demand of Ladakhis, as they felt they had been neglected when they were part of Jammu and Kashmir.

But the euphoria of being granted union territory status in Ladakh was short-lived. Residents realised that with no legislature of their own, they were being ruled from even further away: a lieutenant governor appointed by New Delhi was empowered to take all key decisions.

Ladakh's own Autonomous Hill Council, [already not particularly autonomous](#) when it was part of Jammu and Kashmir, became even more marginalised.

In particular, its control over land has been systematically eroded by the administration. Residents fear that what is happening in Kashmir, with land being allocated for various commercial purposes without consent of local communities, could happen in Ladakh too.

So, since 2022-'23, Ladakhis have been demanding autonomy under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, which gives tribal areas in the North East special powers of self-governance. They have also demanded full statehood, priority in job allocation and two parliamentary seats instead of one.

However, even though the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party in 2019 had said it would grant Sixth Schedule status to Ladakh, it has never followed through. Instead, repeated representations and agitations by Ladakhis about this assurance have been met either with promises that it would be seriously considered by "high-powered" committees that have never materialised or by threats and repression.

What is the connection between this and the action against the Himalayan Institute of Alternative Learning ? The common factor is Sonam Wangchuk, the most visible of Ladakh's activists.



It would be a mistake to think of the movement as being led by or predominantly revolving around him. Many others in the Leh Apex Body and the Kargil Democratic Alliance are also vocal and influential. But Wangchuk has a national and global following that makes him a particularly painful thorn for the administration.

His tactics, from outdoor fasts in Ladakh's freezing winter to a march on foot from Leh to Delhi, have repeatedly made headlines. So, he is especially targeted. In March 2024, when he went on fast, he was accused of legal violations such as disturbing public order. In September 2024, he was arrested again with others on the Leh-Delhi march.

The revocation of HIAL's lease comes when Ladakh is gearing up to re-launch its movement for constitutional autonomy.

The administration's contention that HIAL has violated the terms of its land lease granted in 2018, [have been countered by](#) Wangchuk and Gitanjali Angmo, the CEO of the institute. They say they have documentary evidence to prove that the failure to comply with the conditions of the lease has been more due to delays by the administration itself – which has cited the lack of a land lease policy as the reason – rather than by HIAL.

The original lease had been made the Ladakh Hill Council, which ostensibly controls all land matters in Ladakh. The administration has even allowed HIAL to continue construction, in writing. Besides, they say that if the administration claims that the lease is supposed to have lapsed within a year, why did it take six years to revoke it?

Since it was set up, 400 students have graduated from the institution.

The larger issue, well beyond that of HIAL, is the need for the environmentally fragile region to decide its own present and future. Ladakh is quite different from most other parts of India: it is a high-altitude, cold desert ecology with a unique mix of flora and fauna; it has incredible geological beauty and has predominantly Buddhist (Leh district) and Muslim (Kargil district) cultures; it also has a 1,000 year-old history of self-governance before it was subjugated by the Dogra kings from Kashmir; its [traditional village governance structure](#) pre-dates the panchayat system and is still going strong.

However, since 2019, the central government (and a section of Ladakhis) have pushed their own ideas of how to develop Ladakh, with a substantial budget for infrastructure, modernisation and increased government presence. Not all of this is problematic, of course, for the region does need some investment, especially to create livelihood opportunities.

But coming as it does with pre-conceived ideas based on the realities of the plains, the administration's interventions are often inappropriate, sometimes disastrous. The encouragement to mass tourism is one example – tourist numbers have increased from just over 500 in 1974 to over half a million last year. This endangers the region's delicate ecological balance.

Another example of this is the replacement of traditional, decentralised water management systems with a centralised, one-size-fits-all approach under the Jal Jeevan Mission, which often fails in Ladakh's winter conditions.

Ladakh is also being made a showcase for India's push to prove itself as a climate champion. Several mega-solar projects are being planned, including a massive one in the fragile high-altitude region of [Changthang](#), spread over 48,000 acres. This project will take over important summer grazing grounds for the Pashmina goats and yaks of nomadic Changpa pastoralists.

It will also affect high-altitude wildlife.

Very little information on this is publicly available. There have been almost no consultations with the herder communities and no environmental and social impact assessment.

Projects like the one in Changthang involve land to be taken over, the biggest interventionist threat Ladakh faces. The administration is taking greater control over land use and allocation using its unilateral powers and loopholes in the Ladakh Hill Council Act.

Local resistance stands in the way of potentially massive profits for some private corporations.

The Sixth Schedule movement has united Leh and Kargil, which have otherwise had a tense relationship due to religious and cultural differences.

One indication of their ire against the central government was the fact that the sitting BJP MP was defeated in the 2024 Parliamentary elections by an independent candidate.

To enable a peaceful transition to ecologically and culturally sensitive governance of Ladakh, it is essential for the government to grant the region autonomy and to avoid targeting civil society for asserting the Constitutional rights of local people.

Ashish Kothari is with Vikalp Sangam and Global Tapestry of Alternatives.


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Sonam Wangchuk

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BOOK EXCERPT

In a new book, a journalist writes about the life of a young Dalit boy growing up in Mumbai

An excerpt from 'Scum of the Earth: A True Story from the Margins', by Rakshit Sonawane.

Rakshit Sonawane

6 hours ago



When the Giraffe brand compass box was launched in the market, it became an instant craze among students. Within a week, everyone in Avinash's class had one – except him. One evening, when he had accompanied Godavari to the market, he saw the compass box at a stationery shop. He told her about it, and she hesitantly inquired about its price. The shopkeeper promptly presented one of the compass boxes at the counter and mentioned its price.

“Oh, we'll buy it later,” she said, handing it back. Avinash knew the reason behind her answer and kept quiet.

At school the next day, Panvelkar announced that he would conduct a special coaching class after school hours to prepare deserving students for the elementary and intermediate grade drawing examinations conducted by the state government. A few interested students raised their hands. Avinash wanted to take the class as well, but he did not raise his hand – signing up for the special class meant paying an extra fee.

He avoided looking at Panvelkar and kept doodling in his notebook with a pencil stub, desperately wishing for some magic that would make him disappear from his teacher's sight. ...

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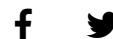
NOT A NORMAL ELECTION

BLO brawl: Why EC might struggle to carry out a Bihar-style SIR in Bengal

Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and the Election Commission are engaged in a power tussle over who can command the officials in charge of making voter lists.

Anant Gupta

8 hours ago



West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. | [All India Trinamool Congress, @AITCofficial/X](#)

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee is locked in battle with the Election Commission over its supposed plans to draw up the state's voter lists from scratch. She fired her latest salvo at the Commission on August 28, [promising](#) her party workers that she would not allow anybody's name to be struck off from the voter lists.

In strictly legal terms, there is little that Banerjee can do about this. Article 324(1) of the Constitution gives the Election Commission the power to prepare the electoral rolls for national as well as state elections. In fact, the commission is currently using those powers to carry out a so-called special intensive revision of the voter rolls in Bihar.

But Bengal is not Bihar. Though legally, the commission draws up voter rolls, in practice, it needs to depend on the state government to do so. And this federal quirk gives Chief Minister Banerjee significant power to influence the process in West Bengal.

As a result, state government officials who would draw up the new voter rolls are now at the centre of a political tug of war. The chief minister and the Election Commission are engaged in a power tussle over who can command them....

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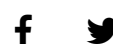
INTERNATIONAL TRADE

From Quad to trade, Trump's fight with India could ripple out

If the tariff situation escalates into harsher financial sanctions, it could divert Indian investment away from the US and G7

Sambit Bhattacharyya, The Conversation

Yesterday · 10:00 pm



Members of a trade association protest against the tariff hikes in New Delhi on August 30. | AFP

Donald Trump's tariff policy seems to have morphed into as much of a tool of foreign policy as an economic strategy. But the administration's decision to impose a 50% tariff on India, a key US ally as part of the [Quad \(Quadrilateral Security Dialogue\)](#) along with the US, Australia and Japan, could have significant repercussions – not just for international trade, but for global geopolitics.

The US rationale for the tariff hike is primarily political. The White House argues that India has been profiteering from [buying and reselling Russian oil](#), in defiance of sanctions imposed after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This has helped Russia weather the effects of the sanctions and continue to fund its war in Ukraine.

Needless to say, the tariff policy and subsequent statements from both [Washington](#) and [New Delhi](#) have ruined a burgeoning bilateral relationship to the extent that the Indian prime minister, Narendra Modi, [has been refusing](#) to take Trump's phone calls. For his part, Trump is no longer planning to [visit India](#) for the Quad summit later in the year...

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TECHNOLOGY

US-China tech rivalry spurs semiconductor ambitions

India, Mexico and Malaysia are trying to manufacture their own chips but experts say setting up homegrown industries is a tall order.

Daniela Dib, Rest of World, **Lam Le, Rest of World** & **Yashraj Sharma, Rest of World**



Yesterday · 07:30 pm

Birgit Palma for Rest of World

This article was originally published in Rest of World, which covers technology's impact outside the West.

In February, Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum unveiled Kutsari Center, a national chip design hub – the first step in an ambitious plan to develop a homegrown semiconductor industry.

Dozens of scientists and researchers stood by the president as she [described](#) the “very

important” project. The centre, due to open next year, is key to a semiconductor factory which could reduce the country’s \$24 billion annual spend on importing chips for its electronic and automotive industries.

“We want to stop being a country that assembles chips and become one that designs and makes them,” Edmundo Gutiérrez Domínguez, general coordinator of Mexico’s national semiconductor plan, told *Rest of World*.

Mexico is not alone in its ambition: In the past five years, Malaysia and India have also drafted national strategies to ramp up their semiconductor design and manufacturing capabilities as they embrace artificial intelligence, and as the [tech rivalry](#) between China and the US deepens....

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Scroll Staff

Yesterday · 07:18 pm



The special intensive revision of voter rolls underway in Bihar's Samastipur district. | [Chief Electoral Officer Bihar, @CEOBihar/X](#)

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The Supreme Court has directed the Election Commission to accept the Aadhaar card as the 12th document to establish identity for inclusion in Bihar's revised electoral roll. It was

not among the 11 documents that the poll panel had initially listed to be included on the roll. This had drawn criticism from petitioners, who described the decision as being “absurd” because it is a document that is most prevalent.



BOOK EXCERPT

Fiction: A researcher devoted to ancient manuscripts sets out to decipher a madman's diary

An excerpt from 'The Book of Death', by Khalid Jawed, translated from the Urdu by A Naseeb Khan.

Khalid Jawed & **A Naseeb Khan**

Yesterday · 05:30 pm



Author Khalid Jawed. | Raghbir Akhtar / CC BY-SA 4.0.

Such nights occur very rarely – perhaps only once in a span of fifteen to twenty years. Tonight is one such night when the distance between the moon and Earth is drastically reduced, and the moon's radiance is unusually intense. Overcome with panic, I am squatting here in the confines of the inner room. This condition of the moon is set to persist for approximately four hours – and these hours will weigh heavily on the world. The possibility of devastating storms and earthquakes looms large on the horizon. Silence reigns supreme within every household. Footfalls are heard not even in the street. Everyone is gripped by fear. Each engrossed in their own prayers. Even so, who is not aware of the injurious effects of the moonlight, such as discomfort, high blood pressure, depression, and an overwhelming impulse to commit suicide?

Squatting down on the floor always brings me a feeling of relaxation, or, as it seems, I have grown accustomed to it. When my kneecaps, calves and heels go numb, it's as if the Earth's gravitational pull gets defeated by them. Then I lose no opportunity of humiliating this void Earth. ...

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GEO-POLITICS

India's pragmatic embrace of a duplicitous China

Rivalry coexists with reluctant cooperation, suspicion with necessity.

HM Nazmul Alam, Dhaka Tribune

Yesterday · 03:30 pm



An anti-China demonstration near the Chinese embassy in New Delhi in June 2020, days after the Galwan clash. | AFP

When China's envoy in New Delhi, Xu Feihong, stood before the Indian media recently and condemned Washington's new tariff regime on Indian exports, it felt like one of those moments in geopolitics where irony overshadows diplomacy.

A nation that only four years ago engaged in bloody clashes with Indian soldiers in Galwan now claims to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with New Delhi against American "Dadagiri".

The word itself – half slang, half satire – was deliberately chosen, a jab at Washington's perceived arrogance in global trade and politics.

Yet, beneath the rhetoric lurks a deeper puzzle: Is Beijing really reaching out to transform an old adversary into a partner, or is this simply another short-term move in the grand chess game of Asia?

For India, a country that still counts its fallen along the Line of Actual Control, the question is not rhetorical. Trust is expensive, and with China, the cost has always been unbearably high.

The choreography of recent weeks gives the impression of a thaw. Wang Yi's visit to India, followed by speculation over Prime Minister Narendra Modi's trip to Beijing for the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit, has rekindled talk of a possible reset....

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