

UNKEPT PROMISES

Ladakh violence: How government inaction on its promises on autonomy has fuelled frustration

The Centre must act quickly to avoid further antagonising an already infuriated population.

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File pictures: Protestor demand statehood for Ladakh in 2023. | Sajjad Hussain/ AFP

For the first time in the long Ladakhi movement to demand Constitutional safeguards for its culture, environment and economy, violence broke out on Wednesday.

The Leh Apex Body, one of the two organisations leading the movement (the other being the Kargil Democratic Alliance) had called for a bandh of commercial establishments on the day, which was widely successful.

The youth wings of the Apex Body, and of religious bodies, had called on residents to gather for a protest outside the NDS Memorial Park, where movement leaders had been on a fast for 15 days.

The sequence of events is not entirely clear, but it involved a crowd gathering outside the offices of the Ladakh Hill Council and the Bharatiya Janata Party, the police trying to violently disperse them, stone-throwing by a section of the protesters, the BJP office and some other property being set on fire and the use of teargas by the police.

At least four people were killed in police firing. Several dozen injured people were taken to hospital. The Administration has prohibited gatherings of more than four people.

This turn of events is of serious concern. Leaders of the movement to demand that the Union territory be given statehood and the protections due to tribal areas under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution status have expressed shock at the police action, but also disappointment at the violence.

Climate activist Sonam Wangchuk and 15 others who had been on fast called off their protest. They asked residents not to resort to violence, which is sensible, given the strong history of commendable restraint that Ladakhis have shown in the face of the Central government's recalcitrance. They also urged the government to heed Ladakh's demands and reminded it of why citizens are angry.

The anger has been building up for a long time. Since 2019, when Ladakh was separated from Jammu and Kashmir and given Union territory status, its people have been waiting for New Delhi to honour its commitments to give the region greater autonomy.

Union territory status came without any legislature, effectively leaving the region to be completely controlled by the Central government through its appointed lieutenant governor.

Granting Sixth Schedule status to Ladakh was one of the promises the BJP made in the national elections in 2019 and again in the Hill Council elections in 2020. Prioritising Ladakhi youth for jobs was another.

The movement has had other key demands, including a parliamentary seat each for Leh and Kargil districts (rather than the current situation of one for both), and clarity on who has

domicile status so that most jobs created in Ladakh could go to Ladakhis.

Of these, the domicile demand was met only in June, but [with serious loopholes](#). There has also been some recent movement on jobs. But the most important demands for Sixth Schedule status and statehood remain pending.

Time and again, the Ministry of Home Affairs has held “high-level” committee meetings with leaders of the movement. But even after several meetings, five hunger fasts and a 1,000-km footmarch from Leh to Delhi by the movement, the government has continued to delay decisions on these demands.

Meanwhile, many more young people have joined the ranks of the unemployed or underemployed. Ladakh has a high literacy and education status, making the frustration amongst youth even more intense.

Equally serious, the Central government has repeatedly shown callousness in the way it takes decisions. The Union territory administration has mostly non-Ladakhis in the topmost positions (including all the lieutenant governors appointed so far), contracts for visioning and planning for the region have been given to outside agencies such as Ernst and Young (as if Ladakh does not have relevant expertise), contracts for infrastructure works are going to outside companies, and decisions on land are being taken without consent of relevant villages or often even the Hill Council (which, nominally, is the custodian of most land).

Control over land and possibly other resources – exploration is reportedly underway for commercially valuable minerals – is one of the most cynical games being played here (as it has been in so many other regions with Scheduled Tribes and other marginalised peoples across India).

An example is a proposed mega-solar project in Changthang, one of Ladakh’s most ecologically and culturally fragile areas, home to unique wildlife and crucial grazing land for nomadic pastoralists herding Pashmina goats, sheep and yaks. It will be spread over 48,000 acres, and an additional unspecified amount of land that will go under a huge network of transmission lines.

No consent has yet been obtained from the herders, there is no environmental and social impact assessment, and yet, some preliminary construction has already begun.

It is not helping that the administration has taken some clumsy repressive actions against activists. The latest of these was the [cancelling of the land lease](#) of the Himalayan Institute of Alternative Learning that Wangchuk set up in 2017. Immediate public pressure against this has

stopped any further action by the administration (including carrying out its threat to demolish all the institute's buildings).

All it did was to generate more anger. So did the recent introduction of more personnel of the Central Reserve Police Force in places such as Leh suggests to Ladakhis that they continue being ruled from Delhi.

It is also very possible that some of Ladakh's young people have been influenced by the events in neighbouring Nepal earlier this month (and in Bangladesh last year), where young people took to the streets to express their frustration at a system they saw as unresponsive to their aspirations.

"The scene today was like what we saw on videos from Nepal," said Tsewang Rigzin, former executive councillor of the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council, who witnessed Wednesday's violence. "I never imagined that we would see such things in Ladakh. I never thought the administration would use violence against us. What democracy is left?"

Meanwhile, some newspapers have reported that "officials familiar with the matter" have blamed Wangchuk for the violence, making some rather nebulous connections with something he is supposed to have said about an "Arab Spring style protest in Ladakh". No one in government is taking responsibility for the underlying current of resentment that its inaction has created.

The Central government's lack of action has ratcheted up the anger. It is also alienating a population that has helped the armed forces to secure the long borders that Ladakh shares with China and Pakistan, as Wangchuk and others have repeatedly pointed out. No amount of commercial gain from land and minerals, or whatever other interests are behind the willful ignoring of legitimate Constitutional demands, is worth these risks.

It is not clear if the next round of talks between the Centre and Ladakhi groups will take place on October 6 as earlier announced. But whatever happens, the government needs to make clear what its intentions are – to grant Ladakh's legitimate demands, or keep dragging its feet, risking further antagonising an already infuriated population?

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