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Ladakh's future as UT

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The Chang La pass in Ladakh in a 2012 photo. | Photo Credit: Daniel Berehulak

Will a greater centralisation of decision-making help the region's already-fragile terrain?

Amidst the babble of voices on the sudden abrogation of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K)'s special constitutional status, the simultaneous transformation of **Ladakh** into a Union Territory (UT) has not received much attention. During last week's parliamentary debate on this decision, Ladakh's Member of Parliament Jamyang Tsering Namgyal argued powerfully that Ladakhis had been demanding UT status for the region for many decades. Finally achieving it, he said, will enable the region to achieve its full development potential. But are the prospects for his constituency that clear?

For decades, a substantial part of Ladakh (specifically, Leh district) has felt stifled or alienated by J&K's decision-making apparatus, which was centred in Srinagar. The J&K government has often been insensitive to the region's ecological and cultural uniqueness, whose incredible beauty masks the extreme fragility of its cold desert ecosystems and the highly adaptive traditional livelihoods of its people. These are so unlike the topography of the rest of India

that people from other parts of the country cannot even understand them.

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Pressure on ecology

This landscape has found it difficult to weather the pressure being put by the infrastructure projects, the presence of armed forces and excessive tourism. Further, these activities, and the inappropriate educational systems foisted on Ladakhis, have disrupted the lifestyles of the region's traditional ethnic groups. The bifurcation of Ladakh, which was once a single district, into Leh and **Kargil**, clearly on religious grounds, has also been seen by many local people to have driven an unnecessarily divisive wedge between Buddhist and Muslim populations.

Given the above factors, the demand to make Ladakh a UT appears to have been backed by strong reasoning. One can wonder, though, why the demand was not for a separate State, or at least, for a territory having its own legislature, for there is little evidence to suggest that coming under the direct control of the Central government will signal greater autonomy for the region. The way New Delhi has treated Andaman and Nicobar Islands, largely ignoring its ecological fragility and the sensitivities of its indigenous peoples, does not inspire much confidence. Moreover, the aggressive Hindu nationalist agenda of the current Central regime could only pose more challenges to Ladakh.

Being home to enormous mineral reserves and tourism sites, Ladakh could easily find itself getting exploited by commercial interests even more once its economy is opened. This would only put greater pressure on its already fragile ecosystem, and consequently impact the mores of its pastoral and agricultural communities that are dependent on it. The region has already been facing environmental issues due to landslips, soil erosion, accumulation of solid waste, disturbances to its wildlife population and diversion of commons for development projects.

More infrastructure projects

However, the J&K government's financial and administrative ability to scale such activities up was extremely limited. The Central government, not constrained by such fetters, may press ahead with more hydropower, mining and road construction programmes, making sensitive areas more vulnerable.

The third danger to the region will possibly come from an increased presence of the **armed forces**. Given the importance the present government attaches to threats, real and perceived, coming from China and Pakistan, the likelihood of more personnel getting stationed is high. Thousands of hectares of pasture land have already been occupied by the forces, with disruptive consequences for wildlife and local communities. The Army is yet to give us an accurate figure on how much of the region's land has been diverted for use by its personnel.

Ladakh has had its own Autonomous Hill Development Council for more than two decades. However, during a study trip in March this year, we learned from political functionaries, activists and civil society members that there was, on the ground, no true autonomy. Decisions were mostly made from Srinagar and, to some extent, New Delhi.

This is not to say that had Ladakh been given greater autonomy, it would necessarily have chosen a different path; sections of the region's mainstream do aspire for greater 'development'. But we need to stress here that many sections of Ladakh's society also have a different vision for its future. This includes civil society groups such as the Students' Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh; the Snow Leopard Conservancy India Trust; the Ladakh Arts and Media Organisation; and the Ladakh Ecological Development Group. These groups have done innovative work on various fronts – including education; ecotourism; and arts. With power receding further away from the region and now firmly resting in New Delhi, their voices are likely to be heard even less.

Need for a sensitive plan

A Ladakh 2025 Vision document, formulated in 2005 after substantial consultation, was shelved both because the Hill Council did not push it, and because Srinagar and New Delhi were not interested. The plan contained several innovative proposals to address the needs and aspirations of Ladakh's population, including by providing sustainable livelihoods for its rural people and youth. How will the state of affairs in Ladakh change now with its new constitutional status? Without its own legislature, the region will have only limited power; further, it is not clear if its Hill Council will continue. A lot will depend on what vision New Delhi and Leh can jointly come up with.

In March, when we met Mr. Namgyal, who was then heading the Hill Council, we found him sensitive to the ecological and cultural issues the region faces. He had just brought out a draft for a mission on ecological farming and sounded receptive towards an alternative vision I proposed through a presentation.

Will he and others around him, through whom New Delhi's decisions will be channelled, be willing and able to mould the proposals to suit the region's requirements? Will they revive the Vision 2025 document, updating it if necessary? Will Ladakh's farmers, pastoralists, women and youth get a more meaningful voice in the new dispensation than they have had so far within the Hill Council status, or will they be marginalised even further? And even if they do get a voice, will they opt for a sustainable, culturally rooted future? For the sake of one of the world's most remarkable bio-cultural landscapes, let us hope so.

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