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# The enduring relevance of Ladakh's Goba tradition

There's a growing call to recognise and adapt this age-old governance system for contemporary challenges.

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As one *goba* finishes his tenure, he formally hands over his duties to the next. Hemis Shukpachan village, March 2022. | Photo Credit: Ashish Kothari

On October 20, 2022, traditional heads (*gobas*) from across Leh district of Ladakh came together to form an association. It was for the first time in the history of this governance system, which is possibly several hundred years old, that the *gobas* formed a collective. "Gobas have never met like this before. It is crucial for our institution," said Tsewang Stobdan of Alchi village, addressing a

gathering of *gobas* in Leh city in October 2022.

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A traditional governance system such as the *goba* may seem anachronistic in modern times, when we have constitutionally mandated institutions of governance like the panchayat. But the story of Ladakh's *goba* institution suggests that it may be as relevant today as it was in the past.

The *goba* is a village headman (*go*=head, *pa*=people of an area) selected periodically by the entire village (called *yulpa*, equivalent to a village assembly). The origins of the *goba* institution are unclear. Some say it came in with the Dogra rulers, who took over Ladakh in the first half of the 19th century, while some elders assert that it is much older.

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G.M. Sheikh, a veteran social activist with considerable knowledge of Ladakhi history, says the *goba* existed in the times of Ladakhi kingdoms and was given considerable freedom at the local level. The Dogras tried bringing in a new administrative set-up but were unsuccessful, so they stuck to the old governance system with new names. Officially, the *goba* became the *lambardar* (or *nambardar* in other parts of north India).

According to the anthropologist Fernanda Pirie, whose in-depth study of a Ladakhi village is one of the few to contain detailed information on the

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institution, the *goba* was selected annually until about 1901. The *goba's* position was given legal backing under the Jammu and Kashmir Lambardari Act, 1972 (with rules promulgated in 1980), which mandated that they be elected, have a five-year tenure, and get a monthly remuneration of Rs.81 (currently, Rs.1,500). The *goba* came under the Revenue Department, and he and the *patwari* (revenue officer) worked together to authenticate village-level information on land, water, and so on.

### **Father figure**

But revenue and land functions are only a subset of what the *goba* does. “Just like salt goes with everything, the *goba* is present in every collective activity of the village,” said Tsering Dorjey, who served for 35 years in Jammu and Kashmir’s State Revenue Department (until 2019, Ladakh was a district within Jammu and Kashmir, becoming a Union Territory when the Centre changed Jammu and Kashmir’s constitutional status). Traditionally, the *goba* played the most important role in the village, spanning political, social, cultural, economic, and ecological aspects of living.

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*“The system has its limitations. The goba has traditionally been an elderly man; there have never been women gobas and rarely young men.”*

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“Around 50-60 years ago, the *gobas* were well respected and their selection was based on experience, knowledge, and livestock holdings,” said Nawang Tharchin, an elder from Thukjey village in Changthang. “He was offered

around 30 animals (goat, sheep, etc.) by the rest of the village as a mark of respect. Additionally, the community would help him with his tasks whenever he travelled on village work. The *goba* was almost like a father, and people would be scared to raise their voice against his decision. The *gobas* were also very committed and did a lot of work voluntarily for the village.”



Palzes Angmo, one of the few women who have served as *goba*, in Chumathang. | Photo Credit: Ashish Kothari

Importantly, though, the *goba's* role was not autocratic or top-down. His decisions were taken in consultation with the *yulpa*, consisting of the individual and the community in all their sacred, material, and cultural sense. Most decisions are taken at the *yulpa*, including on taxes, water distribution, and festivals; in effect, the *goba* is a delegate of the *yulpa*. The *goba* is supposed to work within the bounds of traditional customs (*thims*), decided by the *yulpa*, which is an added check in case the position became hereditary, and an element of top-down power crept in.

Traditionally, the *goba* had substantial knowledge of issues relating to land, water use, agricultural and pastoral cycles, sociocultural aspects, including customs, rituals and festivals, and other relevant details of the

village. However, this has changed over time. In all settlements, the *goba* now maintains general demographic records: number of houses, females, males, animals, deaths, births, and so on. He keeps records of government schemes and liaises with the administration where residents are not covered by the panchayat and/or the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC, an institution unique to the region, created in 1997). He also issues death, birth, character certificates, and no-objection certificates for land transfer.

In many parts of Ladakh, some of the *goba's* crucial functions are intact, such as presiding over the village harvesting and sowing timings, the cycles and distribution of irrigation water, and the coordination of key sociocultural events. In Changthang, Ladakh's high-altitude plateau adjoining Tibet, with largely nomadic pastoral communities, the *goba* continues to play a significant role in pasture management and territorial governance. Another crucial role is conflict resolution and ensuring the internal flow of information and communication (with the help of the *membar* and *kutwal*, assistant and messenger, respectively). In disputes between villages, too, such as those relating to pasture lands, the *gobas* get together to attempt a resolution. Because of this, disputes do not commonly go to state institutions like the police.

The Ama Tsogspa (women's committee), Saspotse, with the study team of Kalpavriksh in August 2021. The committee discusses women's issues but the goba does not necessarily heed their decisions. | Photo Credit: Ashish Kothari

However, the system has its limitations. The *goba* has traditionally been an elderly man; there have never been women *gobas* and rarely young men. "In our village a woman was appointed once, but only because there was no male member of age in that family," recalled Sherab Dolma of Saspotsey village. "We are still a very patriarchal society. Korzok has a small *Ama Tsogspa* [women's committee], which discusses women's issues but the *goba* doesn't necessarily heed these. The men still take most decisions," said Sonam Dolma, a woman herder of Korzok, Changthang.

Palzes Angmo of Chumathang village, who was *goba* for one term when her husband was away, said it was a double burden since women also have to continue with domestic work.

## Highlights

Traditionally, the *goba* played the most important role in the village, spanning political, social, cultural, economic, and ecological aspects of living.

Although the *goba* has no legal mandate at present, in most parts of Ladakh, despite the panchayat system being in place since 1989, the *goba* continues to be the interface between councillors, government officials, and sarpanches, on the one hand, and villagers, on the other.

But the system has its limitations, which should be addressed to make the system suitable for modern times

### **Necessary reforms**

Other inequalities include limited participation of marginalised castes. This may be changing because of the new ways in which *gobas* are now selected. Over time, the *goba's* position of prestige has been seen as a burden because apart from their duties, *gobas* also have to take care of their own livelihood. So, many villages now select the *goba* using rotational, lottery, or dice systems. That way, at least theoretically, those traditionally excluded can also become *goba*. Tsetan Rabgyas, from the marginalised *garba* (ironsmith) caste of Hemis Shukpachan village, said: "I am ready to be a *goba* whenever my family's turn comes."

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*“There is still a lot of faith in the goba as our system. It is a matter of identity. Panchayats are seen as a system from*

*outside. People still go to the goba for grievances and disputes”*

## Stanzin Dorjai Gya, filmmaker from Gya village

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In most parts of Ladakh, despite the panchayat system being in place since 1989, the *goba* continues to be the interface between councillors, government officials, and sarpanches, on the one hand, and villagers, on the other. “With the advent of modern dispute resolution institutions, the *goba*’s role has reduced but if there is a conflict, people still go to the *goba* and not to the panchayat or Lok Adalat. These are seen as the last resort,” said Tashi Phunsok, the *goba* of Khaldo (Hanle). The *goba* is supposed to be relatively apolitical and expected to represent the entire village, but, informally, party affiliations do create biases.

“Every village has three heads, namely *goba*, sarpanch, and councillor, and we need clarity on each role,” said Tsewang Stobdan, the *goba* of Alchi. The Lambardari Act gives a very limited role to the *goba*, missing most sociocultural and economic-ecological functions traditionally associated with the post. And the Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj Act, 1989, does not mention the *goba* system at all, other than to say that a *goba* cannot stand for panchayat elections. This causes confusion because on the ground there is overlap in some key functions. For example, the sarpanch is responsible for development plans, but traditionally this has been carried out by people appointed by the village, with the *goba* as the head.

The Kalpavriksh research team with herders near Hanle, Changthang. |  
Photo Credit: Ashish Kothari

Similarly, although the LAHDC has no legal mandate to consult *gobas*, informally, many councillors do consult them. For the Ladakh UT administration, the *goba* seems to be the village-level contact for the Revenue Department, including during allocations of common land or *nautor* (newly allocated) land. Though officials acknowledge the *goba's* function (“He plays a pivotal role,” said one official), they are not formally recognised. Some moves even actively discourage the *goba*. A recent guideline, for example, said they cannot be over 60 years old. As a gathering of *gobas* in Khalse pointed out: “If the Prime Minister can be over 75, why can’t a *goba* be over 60?” In Leh city, *gobas* interact with ward members and the Leh Municipal Corporation for planning and allocations, but without a legal mandate. Until recently, Leh town had only one *goba*, but in January 2022 four *gobas* were appointed for separate parts of the town by the UT administration. Ever since, these *gobas* have been coordinating with the six ward representatives and

the councillor. However, Sonam Paldan, the *goba* of Skara in Leh town, said that there was no clarity on their roles and jurisdictions. "Sometimes ward members consult us, sometimes they don't. The law doesn't mandate them to do so."

"There is still a lot of faith in the *goba* as our system. It is a matter of identity. Panchayats are seen as a system from outside. People still go to the *goba* for grievances and disputes," said Stanzin Dorjai Gya, a filmmaker from Gya village. The sarpanch deals with *chhi*, the "outside", but the *goba* deals with *nang*, the "inside".

### **Need for dialogue**

There is an overwhelming feeling in Ladakh that *gobas* should continue. But some clear policy measures are needed so that there are no grey areas regarding their roles and duties.

Much of the above information emerged as part of a detailed study carried out by Kalpavriksh from 2021 onwards, in collaboration with Snow Leopard Conservancy India Trust, Nature Conservation Foundation, Local Futures, and Ladakh Arts and Media Organisation. The study, which covered four regions of Leh district, including the unique Changthang plateau, has recommended better recognition of and incentives and facilities to the *goba* from both government and communities. It asks communities to sustain or revive the practice of supporting or serving *gobas* to reduce the burden on the position.

A farmer works in the barley fields of Hemis Shukpachan village in Ladakh in 2016. | Photo Credit: CHANDAN KHANNA/ AFP

The study asked the system to question internal inequalities, and open up the position to women, the youth, and all castes. All relevant laws need amendments or subsidiary rules and guidelines to ensure that the *goba* is consulted in community matters.

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While the *goba* has moral and some legal authority in the village, it is important to strengthen the role of the *yulpa* in holding the *goba* accountable and in supporting him in his work. The spirit of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, in particular the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), 1996, is to enable the gram sabha to be the most empowered and basic unit of democratic decision-making. While PESA is not yet applicable to Ladakh, it could be so extended, given that the population of the UT is mostly tribal. Ladakh has

been increasingly vocal about being recognised under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, or under an equally strong constitutional provision (similar to what Nagaland enjoys), to help safeguard its unique sociocultural and ecological character. This, in addition to the extension of PESA wherever applicable, would go a long way to strengthen systems like the *yulpa* and the *goba*.

India's democratic structure has largely ignored traditional governance systems. Exceptions include States such as Nagaland or the Lachung area of north Sikkim, where the traditional *dzumsa* system is legally recognised as the panchayat. In most of India, the panchayat system was imposed from above. While there are clear advantages to it (such as the inclusion, theoretically, of the traditionally excluded), it is also important to preserve the strengths of traditional systems such as the *goba*. There is a need for widespread dialogue on this to consider whether India's conventional three-tier governance would fare better with the diversity and sociocultural-ecological dynamism that systems like the *goba* can provide.

*Shrishtee Bajpai and Ashish Kothari are members of Kalpavriksh, Pune, and Vikalp Sangam.*

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