

Ladakh turns restive over unkept promises

On February 3, Ladakh saw its biggest-ever demonstration and complete shutdown, over four key demands: Statehood, inclusion in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution (which provides for regional self-governance institutions), job reservation for locals, and a parliamentary seat each for Leh and Kargil. This followed a similar mass agitation in January 2023, spurred by a protest fast by local inventor, educationist, and environmentalist Sonam Wangchuk. Ladakh does not have much of a history of protest movements. But in the last few years, its residents have been getting increasingly agitated by some heavy-handed treatment by the government.

In 2019, as part of its abolition of Jammu and Kashmir's (J&K) special constitutional status, New Delhi granted Union Territory (UT) status to Ladakh. Residents of Leh district celebrated, for it has been a long-standing demand to be freed from J&K state, within which Ladakh was only a district. Within a short time, however, they realised this only meant that one insensitive ruler had been replaced by another.

The Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council set up in 1995 under a special law as a locally elected body, was supposed to give residents an effective mechanism for self-governance. But it has little meaningful power. Much of the expenditure under the ₹6,000-crore annual budget for Ladakh is decided by the UT administration; several Council members and civil society groups allege there is mostly token consultation regarding budget priorities. Village assemblies, self-governed through the traditional *goba* and *yulpa* (gram sabha) system combined with the more recently introduced panchayat system, are nowhere in the picture. The BJP's promise to grant Sixth Schedule status, backed by a strong recommendation from the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes, has remained unfulfilled.

Of particular concern is that effective local control over land use, though nominally still the Council's prerogative, has gone into the hands of the UT administration. There are legitimate fears of land being grabbed by outsiders, including for tourism, industry, mines, mega-energy, and other projects. Not all such projects are unwelcome for a region that needs livelihood opportunities, but residents ask how sustainable are these, who controls them, and for whose benefit.

A proposed Ladakh Industrial Land Allotment Policy 2023, has raised hackles because all of the single-window clearance committees have only government officials and an industry representative — no Council members, no civil society groups, and no panchayat representatives. The document does not even lay out the environmental or cultural criteria for considering an industrial project, nor does it provide for any public consultation, though it mentions "sustainable industrialisation" (without defining it) and priori-

tises local entrepreneurs. Most of the policy proposals have been drafted by non-Ladakhi consultants hired by the UT administration.

Not all that the UT administration proposes or supports is problematic, of course. The 2019 Hill Council decision to make Ladakh's agriculture completely organic by 2025 has been welcomed, but its implementation status is unclear. A proposed tourism policy has useful recommendations to work out Ladakh's carrying capacity and regulate tourist flows accordingly, but it is not clear who will carry out this study, and how its recommendations will be implemented. Actual expenditure and actions to promote mass tourism, already booming in an unregulated manner, are being taken up even as the policy is under consideration.

In 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that Ladakh will be India's first carbon-neutral region. The roadmap for this is unclear. Ladakh may already be carbon-

neutral, perhaps even carbon-negative, given how much its vast territory probably already soaks up carbon and how its pastoral-agricultural-trade-based living has made virtually no contribution to global warming.

Conversely, development projects that the Union government is conjuring up for the region are adding significantly to climate stress, including building a new airport with a capacity for 2 million tourists (six times the resident population!), and a series of highways with enormous black soot potential. Ironically, a mega-solar project that is supposed to be part of the announced carbon neutrality, is proposed to be located over 20,000 acres in the ecologically fragile Changthang area, home to the region's nomadic pastoralists and unique wildlife. There is also concern about Hindutva forces' incursions in a region that has majority Muslim (Kargil) or Buddhist (Leh) populations; in 2021, the Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) protested the attempted conversion of an annual inter-faith Sindhu river festival into a Hindu-dominated *mahakumbh*.

Statehood and Sixth Schedule status could help safeguard Ladakh's land and fragile environment, unique culture, and traditional governance system, combined with new ones like panchayats, and a more empowered Hill Council. Also worth considering is Schedule 5 status, providing constitutional powers to its village assemblies (Ladakh's population is predominantly Scheduled Tribe), and implementation of the Forest Rights Act. But Ladakhis need to build their own capacities and visions for ecologically and culturally sensitive governance, not least because short-term profit-making has entered many Ladakhi mindsets too, as seen in the mad hotel construction boom in Leh town.

With talks between the Ladakhi leadership and the Union government failing, Wangchuk has started a fast unto death, and the region is heating up again.



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