

# LADHAKH A UNION TERRITORY IMPLICATIONS FOR CHINA

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## ABSTRACT

*The Jammu and Kashmir Reorganization Act 2019 established the Union Territory of Ladakh on October 31, 2019, giving the region a distinct geographical and administrative identity. Because of its closeness to China and Pakistan, Ladakh is strategically important for India's national security. To overcome its strong reliance on J&K, the UT need long-term connection and growth. With the new status quo, more engagement from the local populace in decision-making structures is required. Agriculture, tourism, security, education, employment, and indigenous culture must all be included in the development. Local goals and problems must be given special attention, as well as suitable safeguards for the ecosystem, environment, local fauna, and limited water supplies.*

**Keywords:** Ladakh; education; employment; politics; culture

## I. INTRODUCTION

On October 31, 2019, two new Union Territories (UTs) in India were established. Ladakh has been going through a period of concern one year after being accorded the designation of Union Territory (UT). Protests were held in Kargil district on the first anniversary of the UT, which happened on October 31, 2020, and was dubbed "Black Day" by leaders. Kargil has been resisting the restructuring of Ladakh as a UT and the abolition of its link with Jammu and Kashmir since the beginning (J&K). Not only has the political elite expressed worries about the reorganization's ramifications for the people of Ladakh, but also for the connection between Kargil and Leh.

Protests were expected here as the year came to an end. But the reaction of Leh, which has been requesting UT status for the past four decades, was unexpected. This region, which had seen tremendous festivities the previous year, lacked passion this year. In September 2020, key political and religious figures in Leh called for a boycott of the upcoming elections for the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC) of Leh, reflecting the sentiment of this Buddhist majority district. The People's Movement for Sixth Schedule for Ladakh was created by politicians from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Congress, and Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) who demanded constitutional safeguards for Ladakh. The Hill Council elections could only be held, although on a postponed date,

when the Home Minister of India assured the people of Ladakh that their concerns would be addressed by the Indian government.

## II. UNDERSTANDING LADAKH

Ladakh is a diverse community that includes the two districts of Leh and Kargil. Despite its reputation as a Buddhist area, it has a sizable Muslim community. According to the 2011 census, Muslims made up 48.40 percent of the region's total population, Buddhists 39.65 percent, and Hindus 12 percent. As we go more into internal differences, the religious demography takes intriguing twists. Muslims, for example, do not constitute a single entity. The Balti Shias of Kargil, who have close ties to Iran, have the highest Muslim population. They are separate from the Argons or mixed race Sunni Muslims of Leh, who are largely the progeny of Ladakhi women who married non-Ladakhis, mostly Kashmiris but also Turks, Pathans, and others. The Nurbakshi sect of Muslims also exists. In Ladakh, the divisions that matter are not just between Muslims and Buddhists, but also between Leh and Kargil, and between Buddhists in Leh and Muslims in Kargil. It should be noted that Leh is a Buddhist majority district (66.39 percent Buddhists, 14.26 percent Muslims, and 17.14 percent Hindus), but Kargil has a Muslim majority district (76.87 percent are Muslims, 14.21 percent are Buddhists, and 7.34 percent are Hindus).

The Buddhist–Muslim divide that is so evident in today's Ladakh is a much more recent development. In the past, there was a lot of ambiguity and differences were not always evident, especially in Leh. Despite their strong religious identities, religious borders were blurred, according to Yoginder Sikand, who also noted the prevalence of inter-faith marriages. "'Until recently, intermarriage between Argons, Baltis, and Buddhists in Ladakh was very prevalent," he claims. Such unions had place among both 'ordinary' people and nobility." Marriages between people from various groups were widespread until a few decades ago, and it was typical to have members from two different religions living in the same household. The topic of inter-community weddings has become increasingly politicised over time, and as a result, the practise has faded away.

Ladakh's politics have revolved on its "remoteness" and "backward" status since 1947. It was a historical event "busy crossroads for Central and South Asian Silk Route trade." It became landlocked and became a "inaccessible," "remote," "strategic," and "backward" border territory with the accession of the princely state of J&K, of which it had been a member since the mid-19th century. The area's remoteness may be gauged by the fact that throughout the lengthy winter season, Ladakh's road links with the rest of India are closed. From November to May, the region is sealed off from the rest of the world and can only be reached via Leh's solitary airport. The region is likewise behind the times in terms of business, development, education, health, and other areas.

The politicisation of Ladakh in the post-1947 period revolved around its backwardness and neglect. The Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) was the key organisation that championed Ladakh's cause and served as a forerunner of the region's politics for decades. This organisation, which mostly represented the Buddhist community, spoke for all of Ladakh but had a slant toward Leh's issues, and that too from the Buddhist community's standpoint. Only in the 1980s did the Kargil leadership begin to establish the voice and concerns of Ladakh's Muslims, notably in Kargil. And these issues have always been expressed as distinct from those represented by the LBA. While the foundation of the LBA's politics was the demand that its ties with J&K, particularly Kashmir, be severed, Kargil was opposed to this demand.

### III. STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE

Ladakh, often known as the "Land of High Passes," has long served as India's gateway to Central Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and China. The historic trade routes known as the Silk Road went over the Himalayas, facilitating commerce between India, China, Tibet, and Central Asia (Figure 1). The trade route, which remained the principal commercial route until the fourteenth century, was also used by an early version of Buddhism to enter China from India. Ladakh also became a cross-border and local trading centre for traders from Kashmir, Punjab, and Jharkhand. As a result, in addition to their financial value, ancient trade routes allowed for the flow of many religious, social, and cultural ideas, having a lasting imprint on communities.



**Figure 1: Important Areas of the UT of Ladakh**

The UT of Ladakh is now located near to India's two geopolitically contentious frontiers, notably the Line of Control (LoC) with Pakistan and the Line of Actual Control (LAC) along the India-China border, posing a security challenge for the country. During the 1948 Indo-Pak War, Pakistan attempted to capture the Zoji La Pass,

and one of Pakistan's goals in the 1999 Kargil conflict was to break the link between Ladakh and Kashmir Valley by assaulting the National Highway (NH-1A, now NH-1D) linking Kashmir to Kargil and Leh. China's regular invasions into Ladakh have also caused anxiety in India.

In the Kargil area of Ladakh, the Indian Security Forces conducted their final conventional fight. It also has the world's highest battlefield, the Siachen Glacier (11,500 ft to 20,000 ft), which has been a key area of contention between India and Pakistan. Leh, Kargil, Gilgit, Hunza, and Skardu are all part of the Ladakh region. However, Pakistan and China are unlawfully occupying Gilgit-Baltistan and Aksai Chin, respectively, and Pakistan leased the Shaksgam Valley to China after illegally taking it from India. As a result, the region has seen a number of conflicts and incursions from China and Pakistan. As a result, the Indian Army and paramilitary forces are heavily deployed in the region to safeguard the border's sovereignty. Following India's decision to repeal Article 370, Chinese official comments have stated that they will continue to back Pakistan on the matter, criticising India's move and saying that Ladakh is a disputed area between India and China.

#### IV. DEVELOPMENT PROSPECTS IN THE REGION

The Region is shut off from the rest of India for nearly 6 months during the winter season due to its meteorological peculiarity and lack of effective connections. Ladakh has remained reliant on Kashmir for connectivity and growth. However, with UT status, Ladakh has development opportunities in a variety of areas, and successful implementation of these opportunities will turn Ladakh into an outstanding Indian UT.

- **Connectivity**

The Zoji La Pass, which lies at an elevation of 11,575 feet and connects Ladakh to the rest of India via Kashmir, is crucial for connectivity to Ladakh. Due to the difficult winter circumstances, it is blocked for over six months, effectively cutting Ladakh off from the rest of India. People in Ladakh's rural villages remained without road access due to the previous state administration's negligence, producing several challenges. Both people and security personnel continue to rely on winter stockpiles of all required goods to satisfy their winter needs. It is, however, a lengthy process that begins in April and lasts until October, and it can be inconvenient if stocking is insufficient. With this in mind, the central government has prioritised the development of all-weather connection to the UT through a variety of projects. The Border Roads Organisation is building a double-lane motorable road from Manali in Himachal Pradesh to Ladakh through Zaskar in Kargil region. Furthermore, improved road

connection will spur investments in communication pipelines, air connectivity, and power transmission infrastructure.

- **Tourism**

Tourism has always been a thriving sector in Ladakh. Trekking and mountaineering are popular tourist activities, as are religious sites such as Buddhist monasteries, natural beauties such as lakes and valleys, and national parks. Ladakh's flora and fauna are very diverse, including medicinal plants such as *Rhodiola Rosea* (also known as Solo) and a variety of birds and land creatures such as the Yak, Ibex, Tibetan Wild Ass, Snow Leopard, Lynx, and Tibetan Antelope. Visitor infrastructure investments, such as hotels and other facilities, will enhance tourist visits, resulting in more jobs and possibilities for residents. In addition to visual attractiveness, the area is ideal for filming, adventure tourism, and religious tourism.

Although the number of visitors visiting Ladakh has risen over time, the tourism business in Ladakh continues to face issues. First, being a part of the state of J&K, Ladakh was subjected to a slew of security restrictions. Because of the unrest in Kashmir, some people believe that Ladakh is likewise a dangerous location to visit. Second, due to a lack of finances from the State government to encourage tourism in the Region, the area lacked necessary infrastructural amenities to service the visiting visitors. Third, pollution was a result of the uncontrolled and unmonitored proliferation of hotels, guest homes, and other basic tourism infrastructure. Furthermore, the tourist sector requires diversification and expansion into remote areas in order to ease strain in and around Leh.

- **Agricultural Sector**

Agriculture has long been Ladakh's principal source of wealth, with the indigenous inhabitants employing unique farming practises. Though there has been a diversification of sources of income throughout the years, including possibilities in the government, military forces, and tourism, agriculture remains the mainstay. Despite the fact that Ladakh has just a few areas of cultivation and natural pastures, there is still a lot of room for the agro-ecosystem to thrive with a diverse approach. The local community requires assistance with contemporary agriculture as well as basic necessities throughout the winter. Herbs and spices abound throughout the region.

- **Sustainable Use of Natural Resources**

Ladakh is abundant in a variety of essential natural resources. People in the states of J&K, Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, and Rajasthan benefit from the Indus watershed in the UT. Improved irrigation facilities for agriculture may be provided using water resources. Furthermore, contemporary agricultural techniques such as drip irrigation may be applied with the help of other countries such as Israel to address water scarcity difficulties in some areas. Sun energy must be fully utilised to electrify towns and earn cash by selling to neighbouring states because the UT gets ample solar radiation. Ladakh may also support renewable energy by converting to electric cars, since there is potential for multiple solar charging stations and solar panels to be installed along the motorways. Not only will this lower the expense of life in Ladakh, but it will also lower the carbon impact and pollution. The geothermal energy that is accessible here has enormous potential. According to some estimations, the Puga Valley has a potential of up to 40 MW. If properly developed, this might be utilised to deliver grid-connected power to both the hinterlands and Army outposts.

- **Security Concerns**

In terms of security, given Ladakh's vital location, soldier deployment in the region is expected to remain unchanged. The UT will now be governed by its own cadre of local police, necessitating better coordination between the local police and the Indian Armed and Paramilitary Forces in Ladakh. The government could also implement a border area development programme to make these places more accessible to visitors and residents, such as by allowing tourists to hike across the Kargil battlefields. This will improve border infrastructure and communication, allowing these places to support tourism and habitation. Ladakh can also help India and China implement Confidence-Building Measures (CBM). Given the historical value of the region, the traditional commercial and tourism routes between Demchok and Tashigang must be revived. As a result, the quickest and safest path to Kailash Mansarovar Yatra from India would be established.

- **Education**

Higher educational institutions were only found in J&K, forcing students from Ladakh to travel or relocate to Srinagar or Jammu for their education and work, resulting

in significant migration. As a UT, you must provide greater possibilities for Ladakhis in your region so that they do not have to move to other states. Many Ladakh students leave the region to pursue higher education in states such as Delhi, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttarakhand, putting them under financial and emotional strain. To address this, a decision has already been made to create a new medical college in the Leh area. Furthermore, the Institution of Ladakh, the region's first university, was established by the Central government in February 2019 and will have administrative offices in Leh and Kargil.

- **Employment**

All Central government ministries will have an office in Ladakh now that it is a UT. In addition, the Lieutenant Governor and the UT Secretariat have established rotating offices in Leh and Kargil. These new offices will provide jobs in Ladakh and encourage the region's educated young to return and work in the UT. The repeal of Articles 370 and 35A will allow for more private investment, which will lead to the construction of technical training institutes that will give important vocational training to those seeking work in private companies. A special emphasis should be placed on providing training programmes for rural women to improve their business abilities. The handicraft business, which draws a huge number of local women and includes wood carving and leather production, was previously confined to a few destinations, but now there will be the option to directly export and collaborate both domestically and worldwide.

- **Indigenous Culture**

While the decision of abrogation of Article 370 and turning Ladakh into a UT has been welcomed by the Ladakhis but many are apprehensive about the impact of this decision on their indigenous culture and heritage. Also, a strong resentment against the move has been expressed in the Kargil district. There has been a long-standing demand by the population to include Ladakh under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution and as a UT the demand has gained urgency. The tribal population in Ladakh is more than 97 percent and considering this the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes also suggested the inclusion of Ladakh into the Fifth or Sixth Schedule. The Commission feels that this will help in the democratic devolution of powers, preserving and promoting the distinct culture of the Region, protection of the agrarian rights including the

rights on land, and enhancing the transfer of funds for the speedy development of Ladakh.

## V. CONCLUSION

Ladakhis have hailed the repeal of Article 370 and the creation of a separate UT from J&K. In Ladakh, the assumption is that a shift in the status quo will allow the local populace to participate more fully in decision-making structures. While developing the local tourist and renewable energy possibilities, such as solar and hydropower, the government must be mindful of the ecology, environment, local species, and limited water supplies. With an estimated increase in tourists in Ladakh, a strong tourism management plan is required, which must include methods for handling solid waste and the sustainable use of natural resources, particularly water. It is critical that the Region, as a UT, develops its own political language that encompasses local ambitions and concerns, apart from that imposed on them by the state administration of J&K. The government's primary priority should be on developing a comprehensive strategy for enhancing connectivity, education, industrialisation, and tourism, all while respecting Ladakh's traditional culture and distinct nature.

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