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The Union Territory of Ladakh: Achieving Multifaceted Development

Introduction

At the dawn of 31 October 2019 came into existence two new Union Territories (UTs) in India, consequent to the bifurcation of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). The J&K Reorganisation Act 2019 by coming into force created the UTs of Ladakh (without legislature) and J&K (with legislature). The UT of Ladakh, comprising the Kargil and Leh districts, will be administered by the President through a Lieutenant Governor. Since 1947, Ladakh was under the administration of the state of J&K, generating a feeling of neglect and alienation in the minds of the Ladakhis. This necessitated the acceptance of their long-standing demand of de-hyphenating the existence of Ladakh from that of J&K (Map 1).

With the abrogation of Article 370 and turning Ladakh into a UT, the Region has been given a



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Key Points

- The Union Territory (UT) of Ladakh came into existence on 31 October 2019 under the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act 2019, providing the Region a separate geographical and administrative identity.
- Previous state administration of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) mostly remained inconsiderate to the Region's economic, ecological and cultural requirements, resulting in lack of development.
- Ladakh is strategically significant for India's national security due to its proximity to China and Pakistan. This necessitates sustainable connectivity and development in the UT to overcome its heavy dependence on J&K.
- With the changed status quo, the local population needs to be provided greater participation in the decision-making structures. The development must span across the areas of agriculture, tourism, security, education, employment, and indigenous culture.
- Special focus must be laid on the local aspirations and challenges as well as adequate safeguards must be provided to the ecology, environment, local wildlife and scarce water resources.
- This Issue Brief aims to examine the strategic importance of Ladakh and suggests some development-oriented measures that can be undertaken in the newly formed UT.

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The Union Territory of Ladakh:...

Map 1: Union Territory of Ladakh and J&K



Source: PIB <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1590112>, accessed on 2 Feb 2020, Customised by Author.

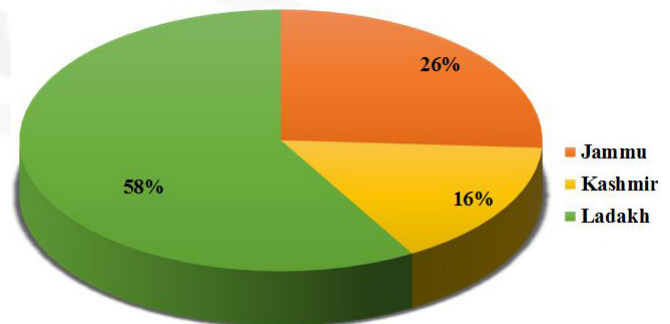
separate geographical and administrative identity. A widespread public sentiment prevailed that the J&K government has often been inconsiderate to the Region’s ecological and cultural uniqueness. Under the previous state administration of J&K, Ladakh received only a minuscule fragment of the state budget due to which the Region remained devoid of development. Hence, with the changed status of Ladakh, the need of the hour is to envision a roadmap for the inclusive development in the Region.

Geographical Terrain

Ladakh holds a strategic significance in India’s national security, considering its geographical location and ecological patterns. The geographic expanse of the state of J&K was 2,22,236 sq km in 1947 out of which 78,114 sq km is today under the illegal occupation of Pakistan and 37,555 sq km under China. Additionally, around 5,180 sq km of J&K was illegally ceded to China by Pakistan in 1963.¹ Ladakh, a high-altitude, remote,

mountainous desert formed around 2.8 percent of the total population of J&K and covered an area of over 58 percent (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Area-Wise Distribution in the State of J&K



Source: Annotated by Author.

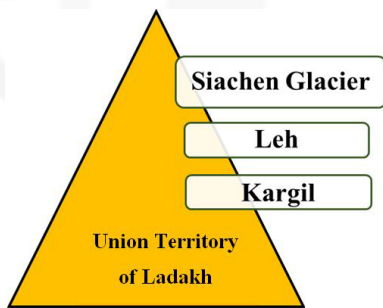
The entire area of Ladakh is traversed by the north-west and the south-east Ladakh and Zaskar Ranges, flanked on the north by the Karakoram Range and on the south by the great Himalayan Range.² The Region is drained mainly by the Indus River and its major tributaries, namely, the Shyok-Nubra, Chang-Chenmo, Hanle, Zaskar, and Suru-Dras rivers. The Region also displays wide diurnal and seasonal fluctuations in temperature and receives extremely low precipitation, mainly from snowfall. Irrespectively, the Region’s high altitude and low humidity cause it to receive the highest radiation in the world.

The population comprises 46.6 percent Muslims, 39.7 percent Buddhists, and 12.1 percent Hindus.³ The UT is divided into the Leh district (10,500 ft to 12,000 ft approx.) constituting Ladakhis, primarily Buddhists, tracing their ethnic linkages to the Tibetans and the Kargil district (8,500 ft to 10,000 ft approx.), inhabited by the Baltis and Muslim Dards who are essentially Shia Muslims. Such distinct demographic character kept apart the views and grievances of the residents of Ladakh from those of the people of J&K.

Strategic Significance

Known as the 'land of high passes', Ladakh has been historically India's gateway to Central Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and China. Silk Road, the ancient trade routes, passed through the Himalayas allowing commercial exchanges between India, China, Tibet, and Central Asia (Figure 2).⁴ The trade route, which remained the primary commercial way until the fifteenth century, was also the path through which an early form of Buddhism entered China from India. Ladakh also formed a hub for both cross-border and local traders, coming from Kashmir, Punjab, and Yarkand. Hence, the ancient trading routes, besides its commercial importance allowed the exchange of varying religious, social and cultural ideas, leaving a lasting impact on the societies.

Figure 2: Important Areas of the UT of Ladakh



Source: Annotated by Author.

The UT of Ladakh today lies adjacent to India's two geopolitically contested borders, namely, the Line of Control (LoC) with Pakistan and the Line of Actual Control (LAC) along the India-China border, causing a security dilemma for India. Pakistan tried capturing the Zoji La Pass during the 1948 Indo-Pak War and the aim of Pakistan in 1999 Kargil skirmish, among other reasons, was to sever the link between Ladakh and Kashmir Valley by attacking the National Highway (NH-1A, now NH-1D) connecting Kashmir to Kargil and Leh.⁵ India

is also concerned about the frequent incursions by China into the Ladakh region.

Kargil district in Ladakh was the battlefield where the Indian Security Forces fought their last conventional battle. It also has the Siachen Glacier (11,500 ft to 20,000 ft), the world's highest battlefield, which has been a major point of contention between India and Pakistan. The actual expanse of Ladakh includes Leh, Kargil, Gilgit, Hunza, and Skardu. However, Gilgit-Baltistan and Aksai Chin areas are under the illegal occupation of Pakistan and China respectively and the Shaksgam Valley was ceded by Pakistan to China after illegally capturing it from India.⁶ Due to this, the Region has witnessed a few skirmishes and intrusions from China and Pakistan. As a result, the Region has a heavy presence of troops of the Indian Army and Paramilitary Forces protecting the sovereignty of the Border. Post India's decision of abrogating Article 370, Chinese official statements indicate their resolve towards supporting Pakistan on the issue by denouncing India's decision and claiming Ladakh to be a disputed territory between India and China.

Development Prospects in the Region

Due to its climatic uniqueness and lack of adequate connectivity, the Region remains cut-off from the rest of India for almost 6 months during the winter season. Ladakh has remained heavily dependent on Kashmir for its connectivity and development-related needs. But with UT status, there are developmental prospects in varied arenas and sustainable implementation of these would convert Ladakh into an exemplary UT of India.

- **Connectivity:** Connectivity to Ladakh is largely dependent on the Zoji La Pass which

is at an elevation of 11,575 ft and connects Ladakh with the rest of India through Kashmir. However, due to the harsh winter conditions, it remains closed for almost 6 months, hence severing the connection of Ladakh with the rest of India. Due to the neglect of the previous state administration, people in the remote villages of Ladakh remained devoid of any road connectivity, thereby causing numerous difficulties. Both civilians and security forces remain dependent on winter-stocking of all the necessary commodities to meet their winter requirements. It is, however, a long process starting in April and continuing till October and causes inconvenience in case of inadequate stocking. Moreover, people are compelled to trek up and down the hills daily for the necessities and face difficulties in reaching medical and educational facilities. Keeping this in mind, the Central government has given priority to expedite the process of developing an all-weather connectivity to the UT through different initiatives. These include a double-lane motorable road to reach Ladakh, from Manali in Himachal Pradesh via Zaskar in Kargil district by the Border Roads Organisation.⁷ Work on the construction of Asia's longest bi-directional Zoji La Pass tunnel and the Z-Morh tunnel has also been given priority. Such all-weather connectivity to the Region will ensure socio-economic benefits to the local population as well as quick mobilisation, deployment and logistical supplies to the defence personnel and give a boost to the local economy by increasing the intra-regional trade and economic transactions. Apart from these, the government must also focus on improving the internal connectivity in the Region as many places such as Zaskar, Nubra and Changthang remains cut-off from the Leh city during winters. Moreover, a speedy

road connectivity will encourage investments in the development of communication pipelines, air connectivity and power transmission infrastructure.

- **Tourism:** Tourism as an industry has flourished in Ladakh for years. Adventure activities such as trekking and mountaineering; religious sites such as Buddhist monasteries; natural wonders such as lakes and valleys; and national parks have been inviting tourist attractions. Moreover, Ladakh's flora and fauna have great diversity with medicinal herbs like *Rhodiola Rosea* (commonly called Solo) and species of birds and land animals including Yak, Ibex, Tibetan Wild Ass, Snow Leopard, Lynx and Tibetan Antelope. Investment in tourist infrastructures such as hotels and other facilities will increase tourist arrivals; hence, creating more jobs and employment opportunities for the locals. The place also provides scenic beauty for movie shootings, adventure tourism and religious tourism to flourish.

Over the years, the number of tourists visiting Ladakh has increased but there are certain challenges that the tourism sector in Ladakh has been facing. First, as a division under the state of J&K, Ladakh faced numerous security-related restrictions. Considering the violence in Kashmir, a perception developed in the minds of some that Ladakh is also an unsafe place to visit. Second, the place lacked adequate infrastructural facilities to serve the visiting tourists, especially due to the shortage of funds from the State government to develop tourism in the Region. Third, the unregulated and unmonitored development of hotels, guest houses and other basic infrastructure for tourists damaged the fragile ecology due to pollution. Moreover, the tourism sector needs diversification and must spread to the far-flung region to relieve pressure in and around Leh.

Though all Indian and foreign tourists need an Inner Line Permit (ILP) to visit certain areas of Ladakh, aiming to protect the indigenous culture but at the same time, some demand a relaxation in it to boost tourism.

Currently, during the 6 months of complete isolation of Ladakh during winters, the only means of communication is through air services. However, flights from Delhi, Jammu or Srinagar are extremely costly. Considering this, the only available economical option for the Ladakhis is to use the AN-32 courier service flight operated by the Indian Air Force. However, the expansion of the Leh airport and aerodromes in Kargil and Thoise being put up under the Central government's regional air connectivity scheme called Ude Desh Ka Aam Nagrik (UDAN), will develop stronger air connectivity and boost the tourism sector in the Region.⁸ Ladakh can also exploit opportunities in the field of niche tourism by introducing mountaineering, ice hockey, polo, skiing, and trekking which remained restricted due to security concerns and now permission for the same must be granted.

- **Agricultural Sector:** Agriculture has been historically the primary revenue-generating sector of Ladakh's economy with unique agricultural techniques adopted by the local population. Though over the years there has been a diversification of the sources of income with opportunities in the government, armed forces, and the tourism industry, still agriculture remains the mainstay. Though there are only a few pockets of cultivation and natural pastures found in Ladakh, still there is a huge scope for agro-ecosystem to flourish with a diversified approach. The local community needs to be supported in modern agriculture and provided basic needs during winters. The Region is rich in herbs and spices. Scientific

research and development in this niche area can be a boon for far-flung areas. Attention needs to be given to the characteristics of the soil which ranges from gravely and sandy loams on the alluvial fans to sandy and silty clay loams on the flood plains of Indus.⁹ By understanding the variety of soils, elevation, and availability of irrigation facilities, agricultural development in Ladakh will result in the transformation of the subsistence-based agro-pastoral economy into a competitive economy promoting the export of its horticulture and livestock-based products.

- **Sustainable Use of Natural Resources:** Ladakh is rich in various vital natural resources. The Indus watershed in the UT supports people in the states of J&K, Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, and Rajasthan. Water resources can be utilised to provide improved irrigation facilities for agriculture purposes. Moreover, with assistance from foreign countries like Israel, modern agricultural techniques such as drip irrigation can be implemented to overcome the water scarcity issues in some places. The UT also receives abundant solar radiation; hence, solar energy needs to be tapped fully to electrify villages and generate revenue by selling to neighbouring states. Moreover, Ladakh can promote clean energy by switching to electric vehicles since there exists scope of setting-up numerous solar charging stations and solar panels along the highways. In an ecologically fragile place like Ladakh, not only will this reduce the cost of living but also carbon footprint and pollution. There is a huge potential in utilising the geothermal energy available here. Some estimates suggest the potential of as much as 40 MW in the Puga Valley.¹⁰ If developed appropriately, this can be used to provide grid-connected power supply to hinterlands as well as the Army bases.

- Security Concerns:** Security-wise, considering the strategic location of Ladakh, the troop deployment in the Region is likely to stay the same. The UT will now be under its cadre of local police and hence, there is a need for greater synergy between the local police and the Indian Armed and Paramilitary Forces in Ladakh. The government must also formulate a border area development programme to make these areas more accessible to tourists and locals, for example, opening the Kargil battlefields for tourists to trek. This will develop Border infrastructure and connectivity to support tourism and habitation in these areas. Ladakh can also facilitate the Confidence-Building Measures (CBM) between India and China. Considering the historical significance of the Region, the old routes must be reopened for trade and tourism through the Demchok-Tashigang route.¹¹ This will, in turn, become the shortest and safest route to Kailash Mansarovar Yatra from India.
- Education:** Higher educational institutions were present only in J&K and students from Ladakh were required to travel or resettle in Srinagar or Jammu for their education and employment, causing widespread migration. As a UT, there must be better opportunities for Ladakhis in their Region so that they are not required to relocate themselves to other states. Many students from Ladakh leave the Region seeking education in states like Delhi, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttarakhand; hence, increasing their financial and emotional stress. To overcome this, the decision to build a new medical college in Leh district has already been announced. Moreover, the University of Ladakh, first-ever university in the Region, was inaugurated in February 2019 by the Central government and will have administrative offices in Leh and Kargil.¹² With assistance from the Central government for introducing higher-level courses, pedagogy, meeting staff requirements and infrastructural requirements, there is an immense potential for this University to excel and provide better educational opportunities to the young population of the UT, closer to home. The UT should also have Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) to provide quality education to the children of the tribal communities that reside in Ladakh. Most of the earlier constructed EMRS have been non-functional and these must be reinvigorated and parents must be encouraged to send their children to these schools.
- Employment:** With Ladakh becoming a UT, all Central government departments will have an office in Ladakh. Also, rotational offices of the Lieutenant Governor and the UT Secretariat in Leh and Kargil have been announced.¹³ These new offices will be a source of employment generation in Ladakh and encourage the educated youth of Ladakh to return and seek employment in the UT itself. The abrogation of Articles 370 and 35A will enable increased private investment, in turn leading to the establishment of technical training institutes to provide essential vocational training to the population-seeking employment in private industries. Special focus must be laid on developing training programmes for women in rural areas to enhance their entrepreneurial skills. Handicraft industry including wood carving and leather making which attracts a large number of local women was earlier limited to select destinations but now there will be an opportunity to directly export and collaborate both nationally and internationally.
- 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ Considering the fragile ecosystem of the Region, the local population is concerned about the ill-effects that an unregulated and unsustainable development model might have on the ecology. They seek this to prevent people from other states, unfamiliar with the cultural, the religious and traditional heritage of the Region, from causing damage to the UT. Hence, the foremost is to preserve the cultural and linguistic identity of Ladakh. For this, it is required that the Central government studies the feasibility of bestowing the Sixth Schedule status onto the UT. Also, if Bhoti, the Ladakhi language, is recognised as an official language under the Eight Schedule, it will provide them with immense opportunities. This will give an impetus in promoting the local language and also allow the young population of the Region to appear for central-level competitive examinations even without being fluent in Hindi, English or Urdu.

Conclusion

People in Ladakh have welcomed the abrogation of Article 370 and the status of UT, separate from J&K. The expectation prevailing in Ladakh is that the change in the status quo will provide the local population greater participation in the decision-making structures. While developing the local potential in tourism and renewable energy like solar and hydropower, the administration must be cautious to provide adequate safeguards for the ecology, environment, local wildlife, and scarce water resources.¹⁶ With an expected increase in tourists in Ladakh, there must be a robust plan for tourism management which must incorporate the ways of handling solid waste and sustainable use of natural resources especially water. It is indeed important that as a UT, the Region now builds its distinct political discourse encompassing the local aspirations and challenges, distant from that imposed on them by the state administration of J&K. The focus of the government must be primarily on building a comprehensive roadmap for improving connectivity, education, industrialisation, and boosting tourism but all in tandem with the indigenous culture and unique ecology of Ladakh.

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