

Youth-led Ladakh Protests: Demands for Statehood, Sixth Schedule and Autonomy

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Ladakh Protests Latest News

- Protests in Ladakh demanding statehood and inclusion under the Sixth Schedule escalated, when demonstrators turned violent.
- The clashes left four people dead and 30 others injured, prompting a massive shutdown in Leh town led by the Leh Apex Body (LAB).
- Amid the unrest, climate activist Sonam Wangchuk ended his 15-day hunger strike, urging Ladakh's youth to continue their demonstrations peacefully and safeguard the five-year-long movement pressing the Centre to act on these demands.

Root Cause of Ladakh Protests

- The current protests in Ladakh stem from the **2019 repeal of Article 370** and the passage of the **Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act, 2019**, which bifurcated the erstwhile state.

- While Jammu and Kashmir became a Union Territory with a legislature, **Ladakh was made a Union Territory without one**, placing it under direct central administration.
- This lack of political representation and autonomy has kept Ladakh's status contentious, fueling long-standing discontent and the present demand for **statehood and inclusion under the Sixth Schedule**.

Demand for Sixth Schedule in Ladakh

- With over **90% of Ladakh's population belonging to Scheduled Tribes**, there is a strong demand to bring the region under the **Sixth Schedule of the Constitution**.
- This provision under **Article 244** allows the creation of **Autonomous District Councils (ADCs)** that govern tribal-majority areas with powers to make laws on land, forests, water, agriculture, village councils, health, sanitation, and local policing.
- Each ADC has up to **30 members with a five-year term**.
 - At present, there are **10 such councils in the Northeast**—three each in Assam, Meghalaya, and Mizoram, and one in Tripura.
- Supporters argue that a similar framework in Ladakh would ensure **self-governance and protection of tribal rights**.

Immediate demands behind Leh protest

- **LAB's Immediate Demands** - The Leh Apex Body (LAB), whose youth wing called for the September 24 protest, demanded an **urgent meeting with the central government** as members had been on a hunger strike since September 10.
- **Government's Response** - The **Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA)** announced that the next round of talks would be held on **October 6**, noting that the last meeting took place in May.
- **LAB's Objection** - LAB leaders rejected the October date as **"dictation"** while their members were still fasting. They insisted on an immediate agreement before ending the protest.
- **Rising Tensions** - LAB warned that while the protest was peaceful, **growing impatience among people** risked spiraling out of control, eventually sparking violent clashes in Leh.

Government's Position

- The MHA has agreed to discuss only the service commission and Lok Sabha seat demands, rejecting statehood and resisting Sixth Schedule inclusion due to its wider ramifications.

Core Demands of Ladakh Protest

- Since Ladakh became a Union Territory (UT) in 2019, residents have rallied around a **four-point agenda**:
 - **Statehood for Ladakh** to ensure self-governance beyond UT status.
 - **Inclusion under the Sixth Schedule** to safeguard tribal rights.
 - **A separate public service commission** to address high unemployment.
 - **Two parliamentary seats** instead of one, to increase representation at the Centre.

Unemployment Concerns

- Youth discontent is driven by high joblessness, with 26.5% of Ladakh graduates unemployed, compared to the national average of 13.4%.
- This has fuelled calls for a separate service commission and 95% job reservation for Ladakhis, reportedly discussed with the MHA in 2024.

Possible Way Forward in Ladakh

- A short-term solution to Ladakh's statehood demand appears unlikely due to India's **strategic need for unfettered access** in the border region with China.
- The Centre fears statehood could complicate troop movements and infrastructure building.
- Protests are therefore expected to continue, with the **LAB and KDA intensifying pressure**.
- A possible compromise could involve **expanding the powers of Hill Councils**, alongside **special job and land ownership reservations** for locals.
- In return, protest groups may need to **set aside statehood demands** and accept Ladakh's status as a **Union Territory**, at least for now.

Source: **IE** | **NDTV** | **HT**

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