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DEMAND OF LADAKH FOR GREATER AUTONOMY

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Introduction

The recent demand for statehood in Ladakh stems from growing discontent among its people since the region was carved out as a Union Territory without a legislature in 2019 after the abrogation of Article 370. While Ladakh is initially welcomed UT status, concerns soon arose over loss of political representation, inadequate safeguards for tribal identity, culture, land, and jobs. Recent demonstrations, hunger strikes, and even violent clashes highlight the urgency of these demands, which balance between aspirations for self-governance and the Centre's strategic concerns in this sensitive border region.

Why Ladakh demanding statehood and inclusion in the sixth schedule?

Reasons for Demanding Statehood

1. **Democratic Deficit** – Since 2019, Ladakh has been a Union Territory *without a legislature*, meaning laws and policies are decided directly by the Centre. People feel excluded from self-governance.
2. **Political Representation** – Statehood would provide an elected assembly and stronger voice in Parliament, ensuring both Leh and Kargil are fairly represented.
3. **Better Governance** – Locally elected leaders can frame policies suited to Ladakh's unique geography, climate, and socio-economic needs (e.g., healthcare in high-altitude areas, winter connectivity).
4. **Addressing Alienation** – Many locals feel their aspirations are ignored under UT administration. Statehood is seen as restoring dignity and autonomy.

Reasons for Seeking Inclusion in the Sixth Schedule

1. **Protection of Tribal Identity & Culture** – Ladakh is a tribal-majority region. Sixth Schedule status would constitutionally protect its unique traditions, languages, and customs.
2. **Control Over Land & Resources** – Sixth Schedule gives local councils powers to regulate land ownership and resource use, preventing large-scale outside acquisition or demographic change.
3. **Job Security for Locals** – Safeguards can ensure locals get priority in government employment and economic opportunities, reducing fears of being sidelined by outsiders.
4. **Environmental Safeguards** – Ladakh's fragile ecology (glaciers, water scarcity, biodiversity) needs locally driven conservation policies, which Sixth Schedule institutions could frame.
5. **Precedent of Other Tribal Areas** – North-Eastern states and some tribal regions under the Sixth Schedule already enjoy these protections, strengthening Ladakh's case.

Arguments against the demand of the Ladakh for greater autonomy

1. Strategic and Security Sensitivity

- Ladakh shares long, disputed borders with both **China (LAC)** and **Pakistan (LoC)**.

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- The Centre argues that keeping Ladakh under direct Union control ensures **quick decision-making on defence, infrastructure, and security**.
- Example: The 2020 Galwan Valley clash highlighted the need for centrally coordinated security responses in Ladakh.

2. Small Population Base

- With barely **3 lakh people**, Ladakh has the lowest population among UTs.
- Critics say running a full-fledged state apparatus (legislature, bureaucracy, separate institutions) would be **administratively expensive and inefficient** compared to the scale of governance needs.

3. Governance Challenges Due to Diversity

- Ladakh is deeply divided between **Leh (Buddhist-majority)** and **Kargil (Muslim-majority)**.
- Some fear statehood could **intensify communal/region-based politics**, leading to instability rather than solving governance issues.
- Example: The Leh Apex Body and Kargil Democratic Alliance often differ in priorities despite a common platform.

4. Existing Safeguards Already Provided

- The Centre has notified **domicile and reservation rules** (June 2025):
- **85% quota for locals in jobs**
- **15-year residency condition for outsiders**
- Critics argue these protections, plus administrative decentralisation, make full statehood unnecessary.

5. Economic Viability Concerns

- Ladakh's economy depends largely on **defence expenditure, tourism, and central grants**.
- As a small and resource-scarce region, critics argue statehood may create **fiscal dependence** on the Centre rather than strengthening self-sufficiency.

6. Alternative Constitutional Options Exist

- Opponents argue that instead of statehood, **greater devolution within UT status** or **limited Sixth Schedule-like safeguards** can balance autonomy with national interest.
- Example: The Centre has hinted at **empowered Hill Development Councils** with additional powers, short of full statehood.

7. Precedent Setting

- Granting statehood to a sparsely populated border UT may encourage **similar demands from other regions** (e.g., Gorkhaland, Bodoland, Vidarbha), making it harder to manage India's federal structure.

Measures that can be possibly adopted to enhance the autonomy of Ladakh

1. Strengthening the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Councils (LAHDCs)

- Transfer more legislative, financial, and planning powers to the **Leh and Kargil Hill Councils**, similar to the authority enjoyed by councils under the Sixth Schedule.
- Ensure **direct funding channels** from the Centre to LAHDCs, reducing bureaucratic dependence on UT administration.

2. Partial Extension of Sixth Schedule Provisions

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- Instead of full Sixth Schedule inclusion, Parliament can craft a “**special protective regime**” for Ladakh.
- Give **autonomous councils control over land ownership, resource management, and cultural affairs**, which are the core concerns of locals.

3. Statutory Protection for Land and Jobs

- Enact a **comprehensive Ladakh Land & Employment Protection Act**, safeguarding land from outside acquisition and reserving a high share of jobs for locals.
- The 2025 **domicile/job quota notification** (85% jobs for locals, 15-year residency rule) can be given **statutory backing** to ensure permanence.

4. Creation of a Separate Public Service Commission

- Establish a **Ladakh Public Service Commission (PSC)** for recruitment, rather than routing through J&K PSC or UPSC.
- This gives locals greater control over administrative entry and representation.

5. Enhanced Fiscal Autonomy

- Provide **greater devolution of funds** to local bodies, with flexibility in designing development schemes.
- Ensure **untied grants** under Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSS) so that Ladakh can adapt projects to local geography (e.g., renewable energy, cold desert agriculture).

6. Dedicated Parliamentary Representation

- Consider **separate Lok Sabha seats for Leh and Kargil**, so both sub-regions have direct voice at the national level.
- Alternatively, create a **bicameral UT Council** with representation from both districts.

7. Environmental and Cultural Safeguards through Law

- Pass a “**Ladakh Cultural and Ecological Protection Act**” giving communities veto power on large-scale projects that threaten ecology or heritage.
- Establish **community-led conservation boards** with legal authority.

8. Decentralisation of Bureaucracy

- Ensure that **senior bureaucrats posted to Ladakh are drawn from Ladakhis** where possible, or undergo mandatory orientation in local culture and challenges.
- Promote more **local cadre officers** in governance.

9. Consultative Mechanism with the Centre

- Institutionalise a **Ladakh–Centre Consultative Committee** where local bodies (Leh Apex Body, Kargil Democratic Alliance, Hill Councils) participate in policymaking before major decisions are taken.

10. Gradual Roadmap Towards Greater Autonomy

- Start with **statutory safeguards and devolution** ? move to **enhanced Sixth Schedule-type protections** ? assess viability of **statehood in the long run** once administrative and fiscal capacity improves.

Conclusion

While full statehood for Ladakh remains a contested demand, enhancing autonomy through constitutional safeguards, stronger Hill Councils, protection of land and jobs, and greater fiscal and administrative devolution can address local aspirations without undermining national security. A carefully calibrated model—drawing lessons from the Sixth Schedule and other special provisions in the Northeast—can strike a balance between self-governance, cultural protection, and strategic stability, ensuring that Ladakh’s people feel empowered within the Indian Union while the region’s fragile ecology and sensitive borders remain secure.