



Ladakh: A mirror cracking under climate change

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FIRST
Column



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Late September brought Ladakh back in the news. There were violent protests in Leh that led to a number of unfortunate deaths. Curfews were put in place, and environmentalist Sonam Wangchuk was arrested under the National Security Act. Protests have since extended to Delhi, Chandigarh, and Dehradun, but the national awareness of the core issue of climate change remains low.

Why doesn't a cry from the roof of the world resonate down to the plains? Ladakh is not warning about an administrative issue or a border grievance. It's an existential problem that will eventually affect every family in India.

The Roof of the World Is Cracking

The Himalayas, often termed "India's northern sentinel", are a wall of ice and stone that protect the subcontinent. But scientists tell us that this wall is still new and weak. A large share of India's climate-related disasters now strike the Himalayan belt. Cloudbursts in Himachal, landslides in Uttarakhand, and glacial-lake bursts in Sikkim are just a few examples.

Satellite studies from 2000 to 2021 show that almost all of Ladakh's glaciers have lost mass, and many are melting at rates never seen before. The Parkachik Glacier in the Suru Valley used to be considered stable, but it currently shrinks by around twenty metres every year. Seventy-seven glaciers in the Drass region got thinner by more than a metre between 2000 and 2020. There are now glacial lakes where ice used to be: silent lakes whose fragile rims can fail without warning.

Glaciers don't melt gently. First, there is a flood when lakes overflow and break their banks. Then comes drought, when the reservoir itself dries up. The cycle of pehle baadh, phir sukha (flood first, drought after) is already happening in villages from Kargil to Nubra.

A Desert of Ice, Now Without Ice

Ladakh is different from the rest of the Himalaya because it is in a rain shadow. It only gets about 100 mm of rain a year; practically all of its water comes from melting snow. As the snowline rises each year, springs dry up, crops die, and people start to move.

A 2023 study by the Wadia Institute of Himalayan Geology revealed that groundwa-



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ter levels in parts of Leh and Kargil were dropping quickly because glaciers were no longer feeding the aquifers. Local engineers like Sonam Wangchuk devised "ice stupas", fake glaciers that hold winter melt for summer irrigation: an ingenious but temporary fix for a dying cryosphere.

Extreme weather events in India are now routine. The India Meteorological Department recorded 314 days of such events in 2022 and over 310 by 2024, with the Himalaya bearing the biggest share.

Hunger, Heat, and Feedback Loops

Climate change affects us three times a day: at breakfast, lunch, and dinner. The FAO's 2023 report says that over three billion people are malnourished in some way. This will get worse because of the Himalayan situation. Research in Nature Climate Change shows India's main crops — wheat, rice, maize, bajra, and jowar — are expected to have lower yields by mid-century, with losses up to 25 percent depending on the scenario. When supply shrinks, prices rise; the poorest, who spend most of their income on food, will be hurt first. Snow and ice reflect sunlight. Lose that albedo and dark rock speeds the

thaw. Soot from diesel traffic and road-work makes glaciers darker, making them absorb more heat. Water vapour, a greenhouse gas, rises from melting ice. Warmer oceans release carbon instead of absorbing it. These aren't lyrical metaphors; they're feedback loops that can be measured. If the average global temperature goes up by 2 °C, northern India could rise by 4 to 8 °C. Think about Delhi or Jaipur at 55 degrees Celsius. At that temperature, even air conditioners break down, tyres fuse with asphalt, and people stop working outside. This isn't prophecy; it's science.

Water, War, and the Illusion of Growth

Thirst will come along with food insecurity. In the next few decades, more than a hundred towns around the world are expected to face severe water shortages. Thirty of these cities are in India. Jaipur, Indore, Thane, and Srinagar are all on the same line as Bengaluru.

In the past, wars were fought over colonies and then over oil. Unless cooperative frameworks like India's river-sharing agreements with its neighbours grow to put shared resilience first, the

battles of the future may be for water.

If the threat is so clear, why don't more people act? Because we are all distracted. Endless entertainment, fights between groups, and the cult of GDP are all drugs. People think of climate change as something far away or too technical, even as it eats away at life itself.

We now worship GDP. Yet India has already lost about ten percent of its growth in recent years because of climate change. In the worst-case scenario, the loss might be as high as thirty percent by mid-century. Crops wrecked, infrastructure ruined, deaths due to heat — the harm is real. Some say that India should focus on development first and that taking action on climate change is only for the wealthy. But this is not a real choice: climate change has already hurt our growth; therefore, real development must now mean being able to adapt. We build buildings to show progress, while the mountains that feed our rivers are falling apart. The contradiction is clear: growth eats the land it stands on.

A Mirror and a Warning

Research from the Indian Institute of Science shows the average temperature

in Leh has gone up by roughly 1.6 degrees Celsius since 1980. Over the past two decades, Ladakh's glaciers have lost about 14 percent of their mass. It's easy to think of Ladakh as India's most remote area, useful for tourism brochures and border maps. In reality, it is a mirror that shows our common fate. You can see the hunger of the farmer in Bihar, the thirst of the worker in Delhi, and the worry of families on the beaches in those glaciers that are melting. All of the feedback loops happening there — melting ice, unpredictable monsoons, and tired soil — will eventually reach the plains. The Himalaya is not just a beautiful sight; it is the subcontinent's cooling system. When the engine gets too hot, every field and faucet below will tremble.

The Real Logic Behind the Protests

The protests going on lately are not just about Ladakh's political position or independence. They are a warning for civilisation. Sonam Wangchuk and local farmers are on a hunger strike to draw attention to something deeper than government negligence.

It would be just as foolish to ignore them because they are from a faraway district as it would be to ignore the smoke alarm because it goes off in another room. Ladakh needs to be declared an ecologically vulnerable zone right away, with limits on construction and tourism that can be enforced. These are not hard things to ask for. They need political will, not technological marvels.

Freedom from Denial

Sonam Wangchuk should indeed be released, but real freedom comes from working together to safeguard Himalayan habitats, encourage sustainable consumption, and prioritise renewable energy. Ladakh isn't yelling for itself; it's yelling for all of us. The Himalaya has already made its statement — in ice, in floods, and in silence. Not just ice melts there; so does human awareness. We need to look in the mirror. And when we do, we'll understand that the protests in Ladakh aren't acts of rebellion; they're acts of remembrance, reminding a distracted civilisation that when the roof collapses, every room below is lost.

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