

Formation of High-Powered Ladakh Committee

The Hindu

Paper - II
 (Indian Polity)

The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) in India has established a High Powered Committee (HPC) to address issues related to the protection of Ladakh's culture, language, land, and employment opportunities.

On January 2, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) constituted a high-powered committee chaired by the Minister of State for Home Nityanand Rai for the Union Territory of Ladakh. The committee will discuss measures to protect the region's unique culture and language taking into consideration its geographical location and strategic importance; ensure the protection of land and employment for the people of Ladakh; strategies for inclusive development and discuss issues related to the empowerment of the Ladakh Autonomous Hill District Councils of Leh and Kargil.

Why was the Committee Formed?

Civil society groups in Ladakh have been demanding protection of land, resources, and employment for the past three years after the special status of the erstwhile State of Jammu and Kashmir under Article 370 of the Constitution was read down by Parliament on August 5, 2019. The fear of big businesses and conglomerates taking away land and jobs from the local people has contributed to this demand.

What is the Sixth Schedule?

The sixth schedule under Article 244 of the Constitution protects the autonomy of tribal populations through the creation of autonomous development councils which can frame laws on land, public health, and agriculture. As of now, ten autonomous councils exist in Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram. As per the 2011 Census, the total population of Ladakh was 2,74,289, and nearly 80% of them are tribals.

High-Powered Committee And Objectives

It is a 17-member committee headed by Minister of State for Home Affairs, Nityanand Rai which includes the Lieutenant Governor of Ladakh.

purpose-

- To protect the unique culture and language of the region keeping in view the geographical location and strategic importance.
- To ensure security of land and employment for the people of Ladakh.
- Formulating a strategy for inclusive development and discussing issues related to empowerment of Ladakh Autonomous Hill District Councils of Leh and Kargil.

What is The Background?

Buddhist-dominated Leh district had long demanded UT status because it felt neglected by the erstwhile state government, which was dominated by politicians from Kashmir and Jammu. Since then, the civil society and political groups in Ladakh have been demanding inclusion under the sixth schedule of the Constitution to protect the land, employment, and cultural identity of Ladakh.

In 2020, the Peoples Movement for Constitutional safeguard under the sixth schedule or the Apex Body, Leh was formed. They announced that they would boycott the upcoming district autonomous council elections if their demands were not met. The representatives which included former BJP MP Thupstan Chhewang and Skyabje Thiksey Khampo Rinpochey were called to Delhi for a meeting with Home Minister Amit Shah following which they called off the boycott call. They were assured that discussions would commence after 15 days after the culmination of the elections.

In the same year, the Apex Body and the Kargil Democratic Alliance (KDA) from the two districts of Leh and Kargil in Ladakh came together to jointly fight for constitutional safeguards for the region. On August 2, 2022, the two bodies renewed their demand to seek full Statehood for Ladakh. The UT has shut down at least twice and protested on several occasions in the past three years over these demands.

However, members of the new committee state that the MHA order instituting the committee is not clear as it avoids any mention of the primary demand for inclusion under the sixth schedule of the Constitution. Moreover, even before the committee was announced, the Apex Body and KDA had scheduled a meeting in Jammu on January 7 to chart the future course of action.

Why Ladakh cannot be included in the Sixth Schedule:

- It is difficult to include Ladakh in the Sixth Schedule as the Constitution clearly states that the Sixth Schedule is for the Northeast. In the rest of the country, there is a fifth schedule for tribal areas.
- Notably, no region outside the Northeast has been included in the Sixth Schedule. Even in Manipur, which has a predominantly tribal population in some places, the autonomous councils are not included in the Sixth Schedule. Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh, which are entirely tribal, are not included in the Sixth Schedule.
- However, it is the prerogative of the government to bring a bill to amend the constitution for the purpose if it so decides.

Geo-strategic importance of Ladakh

- Ladakh connects India to some of the world's most important political and economic regions, including Central Asia, South Asia, China and the Middle East. During the 1962 war, China had occupied a large part of eastern Ladakh.
- India has always considered Aksai Chin to be part of India, China built a highway through the region, known as the Western Highway or NH219. China now considers Aksai Chin to be part of Hotan County of its Xinjiang province claims.
- Following the Sino-Pakistan accord, Pakistan ceded the Shaksgam Valley to China on March 2, 1963 - part of the Baltistan region north of Karakoram.
- Ladakh is important for maintaining the Indian presence on the Siachen Glacier as it provides a physical approach to the frozen battlefield and connects it to the rest of the country.
- The Kargil war also highlights the strategic importance of this region.
- The most recent Galwan conflict has also highlighted the regional importance of Ladakh in particular.
- India can also meet its energy needs through pipelines from Central Asia through this region.

What is the Government's Stand?

Not keen to give any special status to Ladakh, the MHA informed a parliamentary standing committee recently that the objective for inclusion of the tribal population under the sixth schedule is to ensure their overall socio-economic development, which, the UT administration has already been taking care of and that sufficient funds are being provided to Ladakh to meet its overall developmental requirements.

A report tabled in Rajya Sabha on December 13, 2022, quoted MHA officials, that the Ladakh administration recently increased the reservation for the Scheduled Tribes in direct recruitment from 10% to 45% which will significantly help the tribal population in their development.

Culture of Ladakh

- Ladakh culture refers to the traditional customs, belief systems and political systems practiced by the Ladakhi people in India. The languages, religion, dance, music, architecture, food and customs of the Ladakh region are similar to those of neighboring Tibet.
- Ladakhi is the traditional language of Ladakh. In Ladakh, popular dances include Khatok/Chenmo, Cham etc. The Ladakhis also celebrate several festivals throughout the year, the most famous of which are Hemis Tsechu and Losar.
- Ladakhi language is the Tibetan language spoken in Ladakh. It is also known as Bhoti or Bodhi. According to the 2011 census, about 110,826 people speak Ladakhi. It is usually written in the Tibetan script.

Expected Question

Que. With reference to Ladakh, consider the following statements-

1. Losar, Hemis Tsechu and Saka Dawa are the famous festivals of Ladakh.
2. A famous dance of Ladakh is the chham or Mask Dance, which often symbolizes the victory of good over evil.
3. Daman, Surna and Piwang are the instruments used during the performance of folk music and dances of Ladakh.

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Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 and 2 (b) 2 and 3
(c) 1 and 3 (d) 1, 2 and 3

Answer : D

Mains Expected Question & Format

Que.: In view of the geo-strategic location of Ladakh, discuss its strategic importance.

Answer Format :

- ❖ Explain the geo-strategic location of Ladakh.
- ❖ Given the geographical location of Ladakh, Explain its strategic importance.
- ❖ Give a balanced conclusion.

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Note: - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC mains examination. Therefore, to get an answer to this question, you can take the help of this source as well as other sources related to this topic.