

## Regional Dynamics and Contestation in Ladakh Politics: An Analysis of Post UT Political Discourse

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**Abstract:** The regional dynamics and inter-regional contestation have been a predominant feature of Ladakh politics since it became a part of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir in 1947. However, the 'colonial constructed' Leh and Buddhist-centric image of Ladakh significantly overshadowed its regional and religious diversity in the literature as well as policy debate. Consequently, the scholarly works on Ladakh generally tended to disregard the dynamics of regional contestations such as Leh vis-à-vis Kargil and Kargil vis-à-vis Zaskar. Hence, the study of regional dynamics and the contested nature of Ladakh politics becomes essential. Since Ladakh witnessed a remarkable political change in the aftermath of its designation as Union Territory (UT), the constant contestation and negotiation within an evolving discourse in the post-UT period also demand an analysis. This study is based on secondary sources like books, journal papers, articles and newspaper reports and primary data of interviews conducted in the Leh and Kargil districts of Ladakh, India.

**Keywords:** Ladakh, regional contestation, Kargil, political convergence, reorganization, Zaskar.

### Introduction

Ladakh was an independent kingdom until it was conjoined with Jammu and Kashmir by Zorawar Singh, a Dogra general of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, in the 1830s. It became a part of Ladakh *Wazarat*<sup>i</sup> under the rule of the Dogra kingdom of J&K. After the partition of India in 1947, it remained a part of Jammu and Kashmir state until 2019. Though Ladakh accounted for merely 2.31 % of the total population of J&K, it constituted about 70% of the geographical area of the state. As per the 2011 census, the population composition of Ladakh was 48.40% Muslim, 39.65% Buddhist, 12% Hindu, 0.82% Sikh and 0.46 % Christian. Buddhists form a majority in the Leh district with 66.39%, whereas Muslims form a majority in the Kargil district with 76.87 %. Since Muslims and Buddhists form a majority in the Kargil and Leh districts, respectively, the contestation between Leh and Kargil or Buddhists and Muslims became the predominant feature of Ladakh politics. Moreover, the post-UT Ladakh politics was also marked by such contestation.

The political discourse in Ladakh following the reorganization of Jammu and Kashmir and the grant of Union Territory (UT) status to Ladakh manifest an amalgam of

regional contestation and convergence. The differences in political stands taken by the two districts of Ladakh, i.e. Leh and Kargil, in response to the grant of UT status in 2019, exemplify the persistent differences and contestation between them. Conversely, the subsequent emergence of political discourse in the form of a four-point agenda<sup>ii</sup> represents the convergence. The contestation, on the one hand, signifies the legacy of the past politics, whereas, the convergence—though borne out of necessity, on the other hand, symbolizes a developing bonhomie between the two regions which had a confrontational history. The inter-regionally contested nature of Ladakh politics has not received sufficient attention from both national and international scholars on Ladakh. Since the colonial travelogues and literature on Ladakh have produced and perpetuated the Leh-Buddhist-centric view of Ladakh, the Kargil and Muslim dynamics of Ladakh politics often got neglected in the literature and policy debate. Moreover, the regional assertion of Zaskar has also been overlooked by the academic scholarship on Ladakh politics. Hence, the paper attempts to analyze the dynamics of regional contestations and contextualize them within the evolving post-UT political discourse in Ladakh.

### **Commentary on Regional Contestation**

Besides the Kashmir conflict, the identity politics of the regions of Kashmir, Jammu, and Ladakh was a significant aspect of the political landscape of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir. Whereas, Ladakh consistently made its regional assertion in contrast to the separatist movement in Kashmir valley (Chosjor, 2010). Initially framed as a demand to separate Ladakh from Kashmir, Ladakhi's (particularly Leh) assertion gradually evolved into a call for 'Free Ladakh from Kashmir'. However, the regional assertion of Ladakh in the larger context of J&K and the dynamics of sub-regional assertions within Ladakh were largely neglected in public as well as academic discourse (Behera, 2000). Historically, the contestation between Leh and Kargil was a prominent feature of Ladakh's political assertion. However, the predominance of Leh and Buddhists in Ladakhi political assertion was in trend for decades, partly due to a lack of opposition to it from Kargil-Muslims and the absence of any articulated regional assertion by them (Chowdhary, 2023). The Leh-based political assertion of Ladakh, spearheaded by the Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA), began when the political status of Jammu and Kashmir was uncertain. Following the end of autocratic rule in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, then LBA president submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister of India in 1949. The demands and claims made in the memorandum clearly demonstrate Ladakh's earliest political assertion. As it claimed that Ladakh being a separate nation must not be bounded by the outcome of a plebiscite on J&K and shall have the freedom to determine its own destiny (Kaul, 2004). This assertion received its early backlash from Kargil-Muslims marking the onset of regional contestation. When the Indian government paid greater attention to LBA-led Leh's demands, Kargil Muslims resisted due to their preference to remain

within the Muslim-majority state of J&K (Puri, 1982). Moreover, the regional contestation got escalated when Sheikh Abdullah's government, sympathizing with the fears of the Muslims of Kargil, bifurcated Ladakh into the districts of Leh and Kargil in 1979 (Behera, 2006). The Kargil Muslims began to be assertive of their regional political aspirations, notably in the 1980s. It can be attributed to the sheer negligence of Kargil in the scholarly literature on Ladakh that fostered longing for Kargil's recognition among its inhabitants and the consequent assertion (Gupta, 2022). Therefore, the regional contestation between Leh and Kargil started evolving mainly after the latter became politically conscious of their regional aspirations. The political developments that ensued further widened the gap between Leh and Kargil in general and Buddhists and Muslims in particular.

Although the movement for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status, which intensely took place in Leh in the 1980s under the aegis of LBA, produced a notorious episode of political discord between Buddhists and Muslims, it had a negligible impact on Kargil Muslims. A survey conducted by the author reveals that most of the respondents (Muslims) from the Kargil district did not have any idea about this movement for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status<sup>iii</sup>. The Kargil neither supported nor opposed this movement in the 1980s partly because it took a communal shape under the aegis of LBA and partly because it did not have any direct impact on Kargil Muslims. It was in 1989 that the movement took a communal turn when the social boycott, initially imposed on Kashmiri Muslim merchants,<sup>iv</sup> was extended to the Muslims of Ladakh by LBA (Beek, 2000). This communal boycott left a lasting impact on the political landscape of the region, creating a gap between Buddhists and Muslims in Ladakh. In fact, it created a lasting resentment among Muslims in both the Leh and Kargil districts (Beek & Bertelsen, 1995). However, in an interview with the author, a former president of LBA opined that though the movement had a communal start, it fortunately ended in a political manner. Moreover, people (mostly Buddhist) of Ladakh regard the movement of the 1980s as a success, culminating in the grant of ST status to Ladakh by the government of India in Oct 1989. Subsequently, the 1980s also came to be known as the period of 'agitation' in the political narratives as well as academic writings on Ladakh. Besides ST demand and social boycott, the period of the 80's is significant for the evolution of UT demand in Ladakh politics. Though the demand for UT status claimed to have started in the 1970s, it became prominent in the Leh-based political discourse of Ladakh mainly during this political movement of the 1980s (Behera, 2006). However, the UT status for Ladakh remained exclusively a Leh-based demand in the history of Ladakhi political assertion due to a lack of support from Kargil (Chowdhary, 2021). The physical proximity and religious affiliation were the main reasons for the people of Kargil to resist any demand for the separation of Ladakh from Kashmir. Kargil even opposed Ladakh's demand for UT status for its willingness to be with J&K (Chosjor, 2010). Nevertheless, it remained a major plank of the Leh based political assertion of Ladakh. The Ladakhi political struggle for autonomy started by LBA in the

1980s continued even after the grant of ST status. Consequently, in 1995, the government of India through The Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Councils (LAHDC) Act 1995, granted Hill Councils to Ladakh on the line of Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council model (Aggarwal, 2004). Being achieved as a result of the Leh-based movement and negotiations between Leh leaders and the central government, the political class of Kargil was skeptical about the hill council (N. Rigzin Jora, personal communication, June 07, 2024). Therefore, Kargil didn't accept the hill council offer until 2003. All these stands as testimony to the fact of inter-regional political disparities between the two districts that persisted throughout the history of Ladakh politics. This regional contestation again manifested in the political discourse that emerged after the grant of UT status to Ladakh in 2019 as well as in the Ladakh parliamentary election in 2024. The contrast in the responses of Leh and Kargil towards a separation of Ladakh from Kashmir and granting UT status indicates nothing but a persisting inter-regional contestation in Ladakh politics. However, the political convergence between the two districts witnessed in the form of a four-point agenda and movement for safeguarding signifies a positive development.

### **Regional Assertion of Zaskar**

Zaskar is a Buddhist-dominated region in a Muslim-majority Kargil district of Ladakh. The region constitutes over 50% of the area but only 10% population of the district (Gutschow, 2006). Zaskar region always had a distinct assertion vis-à-vis Kargil to add a dynamic to the politics of the district in particular and Ladakh in general. However, this dynamic rarely got the attention of the academic scholarship on Ladakh. The regional assertion of Zaskaris mainly based on the 'alleged discrimination' it faces in the district, further supplemented by the narratives of 'remoteness', 'marginality' and 'backwardness'. The Buddhists of Zaskar allege that it has been facing persistent discrimination from the Muslim-majority Kargil administration (Behera, 2006). Hence, the political class in Zaskar found it reasonable to support Leh-Buddhist-centric politics and demands. Therefore, the basis of Zaskari's assertion has been a blend of religious and regional identity (Gutschow, 2006). Gutschow observes that the people of Zaskar felt alienated during the time of Independence as they had to face exceptional suffering under the interim control of the Pakistan army during the war of independence that reached the region and lasted till 1949. It is also alleged that the relief amount sent by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to the grieving masses of Zaskar never reached them because it was distributed among the people of *Suru Valley* (Kaul, 2004). Further, the narratives of the gruesome attack by the Pakistani army and the Muslim community of Zaskar 'providing supplies' to the Pakistani army during the war have been passed down to the present (Gutschow, 2006). In light of this, the communal nature of war that followed the partition of India also left an impact on Zaskar's politics.

Throughout the history of Ladakh politics, Zanskar has simultaneously been advocating political demands raised in Leh. One of the active political leaders and a current councillor from Zanskar in the LAHDC Kargil, claims that Zanskar never lagged behind Leh in staging protests and demanding UT status for Ladakh, but the district status has been a significant demand of the region for a long (S. Lakpa, personal communication, Sep 22, 2024). Some leaders from Zanskar even mobilized people and took them to Leh to participate in the protests and agitations held intensively in the 1980s (P. Tashi, personal communication, Feb 11, 2024). When the government of Jammu and Kashmir decided to bifurcate Ladakh into two districts of Leh and Kargil in 1979, the people of Zanskar demanded that it be placed under the administration of Leh. But Zanskar, despite being one of the first three tehsils<sup>v</sup> of Ladakh ended up becoming a part of Kargil district. Then, following the example of its counterpart (LBA) in Leh, the Zanskar Buddhist Association (ZBA) started raising demands for the Zanskar region more cogently in 1995, and the major demands included district status, separate assembly constituency and a sub-Hill Council for Zanskar (Upali, 2024). Out of these key demands, the first to have been fulfilled was the creation of a separate Zanskar assembly constituency in 1996, but it became a persistent subject of contention between Kargil and Zanskar thereafter. Subjected to the politics of gerrymandering, the Zanskar constituency was formed in such a way that none from Zanskar, especially the Buddhist community became MLA from its own constituency till date (Jamshe, 2019). The geographical demarcation of the constituency seems to have been manipulated to deprive Zanskar of its own assembly seat. An area of *Sankoo* Valley, for instance, '*Parkachik*' despite being located in the vicinity of Kargil, was included in the Zanskar constituency, whereas '*Rangdum*' – an area of Zanskar was included in the Kargil constituency (Dorje, 2019). So, Zanskar had its own reasons to allege being a victim of Kargil's politics of discrimination and marginalization. Furthermore, adding to the intricacies of the dynamics of Ladakh politics, Zanskar has been exhibiting its regional political assertion vis-à-vis Kargil.

### Post UT Dynamics and Contestation

Union government passed Jammu and Kashmir State Reorganization Act 2019 to abrogate Article 370 and bifurcate the state into two separate UTs of J&K and Ladakh. It received high appreciation from the leaders and masses of the Leh district and criticism from the leaders and masses of the Kargil district as immediate responses. A sense of fulfilment among the people of Leh and resentment among the people of Kargil were witnessed and even reported by The Times of India. In Leh, LBA organized a 'thanksgiving' ceremony on 8 Aug 2019 along with the representatives of different socio-religious organizations in Leh with elation (Daily Excelsior, 2019). Celebratory mood prevailed in Leh with the people dancing in the Leh market and the display of banner in the marketplace saying "Ladakh Celebrates its 1<sup>st</sup> Independence Day", reports The Economic Times. The leaders in Leh, across political parties and socio-



religious organizations, expressed a sense of gratitude and appreciated the government's decision to separate Ladakh from Kashmir. A local Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) leader and then member of parliament from Ladakh expressed a sense of achievement by terming it "Independence from Kashmir" (The Hindu, 2019). Similarly, a former BJP Minister and the current LBA president, in an interview with Reach Ladakh Bulletin<sup>vi</sup>, expressed the sense of achievement upon the grant of UT status to Ladakh by calling it a "dream come true moment for the people of Ladakh" (Desal, 2019). Whereas, a former minister and a local congress leader also claim that the Congress Party Leh has been continuously advocating Ladakh's UT demand although the grant of UT status to Ladakh by abrogating Article 370 was never a part of the national agenda of Indian National Congress (N. R. Jora, personal communication, June 07, 2024). The reason behind such overwhelming positive responses from Leh-based political leaders across parties and socio-religious organizations lies in the fact that UT demand has been the major plank of Leh-based political parties and socio-religious organizations particularly under the aegis of LBA. Consequently, leaders of Leh district across political parties and socio-religious organizations sensed more hope than apprehension in their immediate responses to the grant of UT status to Ladakh. Though many of them expressed uncertainty about the implications of political changes in UT, the overall mood was optimistic towards the existing regime owing to the commitment it showed by fulfilling their long pending demand<sup>vii</sup>. Moreover, given the continuation of councils by the reorganization act of 2019 and the home minister's assurance of empowering them, the leaders of Leh were optimistic.

The contrast could be seen in the responses of Kargil-based leaders to the government's 5<sup>th</sup> August decision to separate Ladakh from Kashmir. The Muslims of Kargil blatantly opposed the decision to make Ladakh a UT by decoupling it from Kashmir, formed Kargil Joint Action Committee and gave a call for *Bandh* (strike) denouncing the government's action on Jammu & Kashmir (Gupta, 2022). Kargil witnessed the imposition of section 144 of CrPC, suspension of the internet and days of shutdown following the abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019 (Lundup et al., 2019). The political class here expressed a sense of disillusionment, concern and disapproval towards what they called an 'imposed decision'. A former member of the J&K legislative assembly and a prominent congress leader from Kargil expressed his disapproval of the grant of UT status to Ladakh by calling it "... an imposed decision without the consent of the people" (The Times of India, 2019). Whereas a former member of the J&K legislative council from Kargil decried the decision to separate Ladakh from Kashmir as discriminatory and alleged that the decision to decouple Ladakh from Kashmir was against the wishes of the Kargil people (The Times of India, 2019). Another leader even called the August 2019 decision a betrayal of the people of the region who have always been upfront in defending the country during wars with Pakistan (Donthi, 2019). Subsequently, the political class and leaders of socio-religious organizations of the Kargil district formed the Kargil Democratic Alliance<sup>viii</sup> (KDA),

rejected union territory status and started demanding restoration of Article 370 and 35 A (Daily Excelsior, 2020). The political class of Kargil not only opposed the bifurcation of the state of Jammu and Kashmir but also supported the People's Alliance for Gupkar Declaration<sup>ix</sup> (PAGD) in their demand for the restoration of Article 370 (Chowdhary, 2023). Therefore, advocating and pursuing the demands of the People Alliance for Gupkar Declaration (PAGD) was the initial stand taken by Kargil leaders which invited strong criticism from some leaders of Leh. Moreover, the three important leaders of KDA were party to the PIL filed in the Supreme Court of India challenging the abrogation of Article 370 (Paljor & Mussa, 2021). While the stand taken by Kargil-centric leaders is understandable from the fact that they have been opposing Ladakh's separation from Kashmir as well as the UT demand. However, Zaskar celebrated the 1<sup>st</sup> anniversary of UT enthusiastically on 5<sup>th</sup> August 2020 under the initiative of ZBA Youth Wing (Daily Excelsior, 2020). The people of Zaskar also showed a similar related response to that of Leh district to the reorganization of J&K and grant of UT status to Ladakh.

Unlike the leaders of Leh, the political class of Kargil expressed apprehension about the implications of the political changes upon becoming UT. Immediately after the grant of UT, it was the political class of Kargil who overtly expressed concerns over the status of political representation, jobs and land in the new political set-up (Chowdhary, 2023). They even rebuked leaders of Leh for celebrating the UT and not showing similar concerns. Soon, the leaders of Leh also became apprehensive about the ramifications of a new politico-administrative system of UT. Moreover, the people of Leh also realized that their autonomy and democracy were undermined in the UT without legislature (Dolker et al, 2024). Subsequently, these developments paved the way for an unprecedented convergence of Leh and Kargil in the form of a common political assertion. Once again, the historical role played by the socio-religious organizations of Leh and Kargil in Ladakh politics became recurrent in the post-UT period. The two prominent socio-religious organizations of Kargil-Imam Khomeini Memorial Trust (IKMT) and Islamia School (ISK)- along with political parties of the district formed KJAC shortly after the Aug 5<sup>th</sup> decision (Gupta, 2022). Whereas LBA became a prominent role player in the subsequent movement that took place in Leh under Apex Body Leh (ABL) (Lhaskyab, 2024). KJAC led to the formation of KDA in Kargil. Whereas a student-initiated demand for a sixth schedule became a bigger Movement for a Sixth Schedule for Ladakh in Leh, which led to the constitution of ABL (comprising veteran leaders from Leh).

The divergent interests of the two groups were apparent in the beginning, with ABL prioritizing the demand for the inclusion of Ladakh under the sixth schedule of the Indian constitution and KDA demanding restoration of Article 370 among others. However, the common concerns for loss of political representation<sup>x</sup>, employment opportunities and land safeguard compelled both groups to view each other as desirable allies (Pathak, 2024). Consequently, in August 2020, the two groups of Leh

and Kargil came together for a joint political struggle which led to subsequent movement for safeguard and autonomy. But the joint movement soon witnessed a rough trail, particularly when the key leader of Leh group (ABL) got elected as LBA president in 2021<sup>xi</sup>. LBA under newly elected president, faced criticism from its regional branches of Nubra and Kargil for being allied with KDA on the statehood demand (Dorjey, 2021). The main opposition that ABL in general and LBA in particular faced in Leh for allying with KDA was on the statehood demand, which was based on the narrative of possible Muslim domination in Ladakh if granted statehood. Whereas, the Zanskar Buddhist Association also refused to support the alliance of ABL and KDA. Two major reasons for the same, cited by a leader of Zanskar in a personal interview with the author, were the Statehood demand initiated by Kargil Muslim leaders and the lack of Zanskar Buddhist representation in KDA. However, Paljor and Hussain consider the affiliation of the members of ZBA and Kargil Buddhist Association (KBA) with the ruling BJP as a reason for the two not supporting the alliance (Paljor & Hussain, 2022). Whereas, another leader from Zanskar expressed his support for the four-point demands put forth by the alliance (P. Tashi, personal communication, Feb 11, 2024). Hence, the above developments manifest the challenges that LBA faced for being the harbinger of this exceptional convergence of the two districts on the one hand and the presence of regional dynamics of Zanskar on the other in the post-UT Ladakh politics.

Subsequently, the initiative taken by LBA with the support of other socio-religious organizations of Leh and the series of negotiations that took place between ABL and KDA consolidated the alliance between the two. Kargil Muslim leaders also slackened their earlier politics of refusal and entered into triangular negotiations with Leh Buddhist leadership, political leaders of Kashmir valley and the government of India (Gupta, 2022). The agreements were reached between Leh and Kargil to compromise some conflicting interests for the larger cause of Ladakh and create a common platform to launch a joint and more intensive movement. KDA compromised on the demand for restoration of Article 370 which was the major cause of contention between both the districts at the initial stage of the movement. In fact, it was after separate meetings of both groups with the minister of state for home affairs in July 2021 that the two had a meeting and concluded to work together to achieve commonly agreed four objectives which include statehood for Ladakh, separate MP seats for both the districts, constitutional safeguard under sixth schedule and public service commission for Ladakh (Paljor & Mussa, 2021). The alliance forged between ABL and KDA heralded a fresh political convergence between the two districts in the history of Ladakh. The alliance was strengthened and received extensive public support when Sonam Wangchuk, the renowned social activist and Roman Magsaysay awardee from Ladakh, proclaimed his advocacy and started sensitizing the masses to the demands of Ladakh. The subsequent political assertion of Ladakh was marked by an unprecedented inclusiveness under the alliance (Chowdhary, 2023). However, a



mixed response from Zaskar Buddhists to the four-point demands put forth by the alliance manifeststhe regional dynamics of Zaskar within emerging collegiality between Leh and Kargil.

The Leh-Kargil convergence confronted another challenge in 2022. This time, alingering *Gonpa*<sup>xii</sup> conflict was heightened when a group of Buddhists from both Leh and Kargil, under a religious leader, became assertive to construct a *Gonpa* on a disputed land in the Kargil market (Lhaskyab, 2024). The conflict got so intensified that nearly clashes between Buddhists and Muslims in Kargil were prevented with the intervention of the Ministry of Home Affairs. However, ABL and KDA were successful in resolving the *Gonpa* conflict with an agreement to provide alternative land for the *Gonpa* construction in *Kurbathang* area of Kargil (Sharma, 2022).The successful resolution of the long pending monastery dispute helped strengthen people's confidence in the leadership of both the groups in the joint political struggle of Ladakh that followed. Whereas LBA once again became the driving force behind the post-UT political movement of Ladakh in Leh. The significance of LBA's stake in the political convergence of Leh and Kargil in the newly formed UT Ladakh can be clearly seen in the influence of the movement on its presidential election in 2024 (Lhaskyab, 2024).The influences of the movement were also seen in the electoral politics of Ladakh, may it be local council elections or parliamentary elections. One of the major disappointments among the people of Ladakh in the post-UT formation was the sense of disempowerment of its councils in the new administrative set-up of UT (Ganai, 2024). One of the main complains of the political leaders of both Leh and Kargil in general and members of the councils of both the districts has been the alleged 'depreciation' of councils' power. Moreover, the 'perceived insignificance' of councils and monopoly of bureaucracy in UT-set up has been cited as a justification for Ladakh's demand for statehood and sixth schedule. In that context, the council elections held in Leh in 2020 and in Kargil in 2023 become pertinent to be examined here. A year after the grant of UT status to Ladakh, the 6<sup>th</sup> LAHDC Lehelections were held. The call for a boycott of the election was given by the leaders of Leh across political parties in response to the alleged negligence of Ladakh's demands by the central government (Chowdhary, 2021).Soon the MHA had to summon a meeting with the leaders of Ladakh in Delhi. The boycott of the election was withdrawn when the assurance was given by the Centre to have dialogue with the leaders of Ladakh on their demands shortly after the election (Sandhu, 2020).Likewise, during the 5<sup>th</sup> LAHDC Kargil election held in 2023, an uncommon amity was witnessed between the leaders of political parties from both districts, as the leaders from Leh were seen campaigning for their counterparts in Kargil. Professor Sidiq Wahid views it as a part of a larger solidarity between two districts developed in response to the perceived failure of the ruling government in delivering the promises it made in the aftermath of the formation of UT (Wahid, 2023).

The election to the only parliamentary constituency of Ladakh in 2024 saw the recurrence of old politics of contestation between the two districts of Ladakh: Leh and Kargil. Putting up a united candidate for parliamentary election in Ladakh at the district level by both Leh and Kargil has been a conventional exercise on a religious basis in the past (Hussain, 2024). The public aspiration and efforts from leaders to put a unanimous candidate from the district were again witnessed in both Leh and Kargil. While consensus was developed among political parties in Kargil to put a unanimous candidate, parties in Leh could not agree on a single candidate. Rekha Chowdhary opines that the declaration of a Leh congress leader as INDIA alliance candidate and the disagreement to it shown by the leaders of both National Conference (NC) and Indian National Congress (INC) Kargil units were the reasons making unity among parties in Kargil possible (Chowdhary, 2024). The clash between the two main parties- BJP and INC- marked the electoral dynamics of the parliamentary election in Leh. Though the complaint about partisan politics and division in Leh helping Kargil's candidate win the election was doing rounds in the public discussions, Leh could not unite on putting up a single candidate. BJP and INC district units obtaining party mandates for candidates from Leh entered into the fray. So, three candidates fought election to the Ladakh parliamentary election. Although religious and regional considerations were quite evident in the fight for party mandate and public debate, Ladakh's post-UT demands remained paramount in the election rhetoric and narratives of all three candidates. In fact, all three candidates projected themselves as a better representative of Ladakh's demand for constitutional safeguards in the campaign in their respective ways (Hussain, 2024). So, the regional contestation between Leh and Kargil was apparent in the Ladakh parliamentary election 2024 as history repeated. Yet the exceptional post-UT unified Ladakh's movement for safeguard and autonomy being at the backdrop of the election appears to have bounded candidates from explicitly playing regional and communal cards.

Earlier, the verdict of the Supreme Court (SC) on the abrogation of Article 370, which made the creation of Ladakh UT possible, received diverse responses from the political class of Ladakh. The responses of ABL and KDA, who forged an alliance in 2021, towards the court's verdict were starkly divergent. ABL, in its statement, held the court's decision as the right step towards stronger national integration (Iqbal, 2023). While KDA voiced disapproval of SC's verdict on Article 370 abrogation. The political leaders of Kargil expressed displeasure over the verdict, and they complained that the court upheld UT Ladakh without legislature, used unconvincing legal rationale and deprived Ladakh of safeguards available under Article 370 and 35 A (Dolma et al., 2024) Meanwhile, leaders of Leh across community hailed the SC's verdict, where some called it a landmark decision. Throughout the journey of UT demand, the political class of Leh considered Article 370 the foremost hurdle in achieving this long-aspired goal. Moreover, given the past incessant contradiction between Leh and Kargil on the issue of UT demand, diametric responses to the court's verdict were expected.

The contrasting responses of the people towards the government's announcement of creating five new districts<sup>xiii</sup> in Ladakh, namely Zaskar, Drass, Nubra and Changthang, were also witnessed. In an overwhelming reception of Union Home Minister's Aug 2024 announcement of district creation, the celebrations took place in the Zaskar and Drass regions more expressively. Later, apparently as a part of the BJP Ladakh unit's initiative, the other two regions of Changthang and Nubra followed suit. Contrarily, a protest erupted in the *Sankoo* area of the Kargil district for not being given consideration in the exercise of district creation despite having a large geography and population. A former Chief Executive Councilor of LAHDC Kargil, in a press conference, expressed disappointment over ignoring *the Shakar-Chigtan and Sankoo-Suru areas of the Kargil district* in the exercise (Wahid, 2024). In the meanwhile, the government constituted a five-member committee headed by a retired IAS officer in September 2024 to access various aspects related to the formation of five new Districts.

### Conclusion

The roots of regional contestation in Ladakh politics trace back to its earliest days as part of independent India, becoming more pronounced after Ladakh's bifurcation into two districts in 1979. This contestation is driven by regional assertions and communal dynamics, particularly between the Buddhist-majority Leh and Muslim-majority Kargil. Zaskar, a Buddhist-majority region within Kargil, adds another layer to these regional assertions. Despite the post-UT political convergence between Leh and Kargil, recurring divergences, such as differing responses to the creation of Ladakh UT in 2019 and the declaration of five new districts in 2024, highlight persistent contestations. These dynamics, including Zaskar's regional politics, underscore the complex and contested nature of Ladakh's political landscape.

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<sup>i</sup>Ladakh Wazarat was comprised of Skardu, Kargil and Leh.

<sup>ii</sup>The post UT Ladakh demands put forth by an alliance of Leh and Kargil groups, namely Apex Body Leh and Kargil Democratic Alliance, are: 1) Statehood for Ladakh 2) Inclusion of Ladakh under sixth schedule of Indian constitution 3) Public Service Commission for Ladakh 4) Separate parliamentary seats for Leh and Kargil districts

<sup>iii</sup>A survey was conducted by the author in 2024 as a part of Ph.D. field work.

<sup>iv</sup>See *Demystifying Kashmir* (2006) by Navnita Chadha Behera

<sup>v</sup>Leh and Kargil were other two tehsils.

<sup>vi</sup>A popular local news bulletin.

<sup>vii</sup>Separating Ladakh from J&K and granting UT status to it was earlier considered difficult because of the existence of Article 370.

<sup>viii</sup>A consortium of political, social and religious organizations of Kargil district.

<sup>ix</sup>An alliance formed by six mainstream political parties of Kashmir in response to the abrogation of art 370 and end of special status of Jammu and Kashmir state.

<sup>x</sup>Ladakh was represented by 4 members (2 each from Leh and Kargil district) and 2 members (1 each from both the district) in the Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir respectively. With severance of its political relation with J&K in 2019, Ladakh is left with a single MP to represent it in the central parliament.

<sup>xi</sup>After the election of one of the key leaders of ABL as president of LBA, the latter became the key constituent of the former and an important force behind the movement for safeguard and autonomy that followed.

<sup>xii</sup>*Gonpa* means Buddhist monastery

<sup>xiii</sup>Union Home Minister, Amit Shah, announced government's decision to create five new districts in Ladakh through the Minister's twitter handle on X (Former twitter) on Aug 26, 2024.