

Sonam Wangchuk's Hunger Strike

Why In News

- The **Kargil Democratic Alliance (KDA)** on Tuesday called for a **half-day general strike** on Wednesday, March 20, in solidarity with renowned education reformist **Sonam Wangchuk**, who has been on a hunger strike in Leh since **March 6 over his demand** for statehood and constitutional safeguards under the sixth schedule for the Union Territory of Ladakh.



What It Is All About

- **Braving sub-zero temperatures**, environmentalist Sonam Wangchuk began his 'climate fast' after talks between the joint representatives of Leh-based Apex body and Kargil Democratic Alliance (KDA) heading an agitation in support of four-point demands and the central government hit a deadlock.



- “**250 people slept hungry in -12°C** to remind the Indian Government of their promises to safeguard Ladakh’s environment and its tribal indigenous culture. This Government likes to call India the ‘Mother of Democracy’.
- But if India denies democratic rights to people of Ladakh, then it could only be called a Stepmother of Democracy,” Wangchuk, Ladakh-based engineer and educator, wrote in his post on X on Monday, while thanking those who participated in the previous day’s protest against Ladakh’s climate crisis.



- Sonam Wangchuk said that he, along with other agitators, was planning a **border march soon** to highlight the "**ground reality**" to the outside world. “Our nomads are losing prime pasture land to huge Indian industrial plants to the south & Chinese encroachment to the north. To show the ground reality we're planning a Border March of **10,000 Ladakhi shepherds** & farmers soon,” he announced.



All You Need To Know

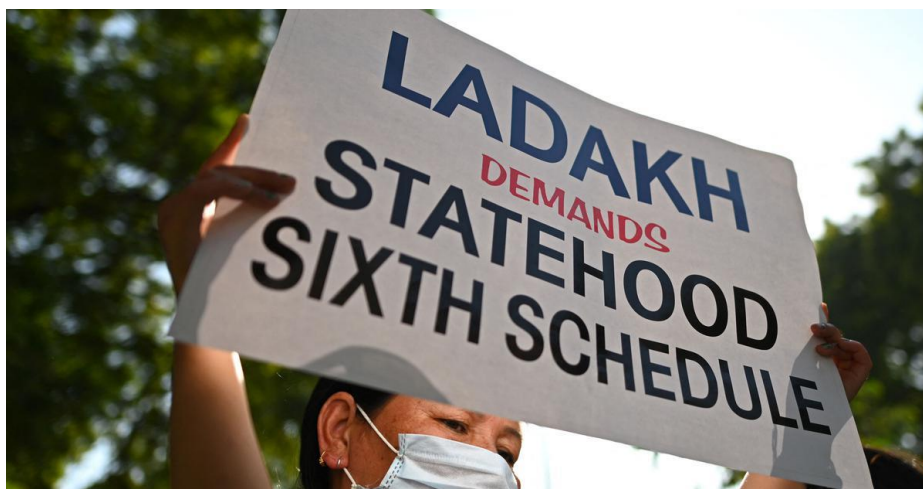
- Wangchuk is accompanied by scores of locals who want to remind “the Indian Government of their promises to safeguard Ladakh’s environment and its tribal indigenous culture”. Following the **repeal of Article 370 in August 2019**, and the subsequent enactment of the **Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act, 2019**, Ladakh was recognised as a separate Union Territory “**without legislature**”.
- UTs like New **Delhi and Pondicherry** have their own Legislative Assemblies. Speaking from Leh earlier this month, he underlined two appeals in his address ahead of the protest: **an appeal to all people** to lead simpler lives, and a **direct appeal to the government** to fulfil its promise to include Ladakh in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution and give statehood for the region, Indian Express reported.



- “After many meetings, the **government has backtracked on its promises** and is talking of a much diluted version of what is already in the Constitution for this exact situation. So what happened and why did they change their mind?,” Wangchuk said, pointing out that the Bharatiya Janata Party-led Central government had mentioned the protection of **Ladakh under the Sixth Schedule** in their manifestos for 2019 Lok Sabha elections and 2020 Ladakh Hill Council polls.



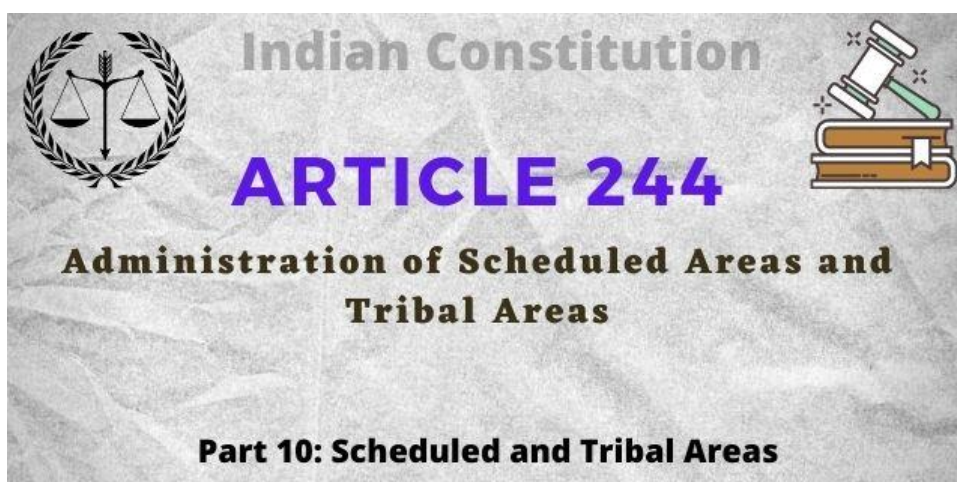
- Nearly five years ago, when Ladakh was declared a separate Union Territory, the people celebrated. But now, “People in Ladakh are disillusioned and feel they have been taken for a ride. I can only say that they (the BJP) only think about elections and how many seats they can get, but forget about people,” Wangchuk said.
- The activist expressed **environmental concerns surrounding the Himalayas** and said industries have been exploiting the mountains by setting up dams and mining.
- Wangchuk said his goal was to make the voices of Ladakhi people heard “so that the **pressure of the industrial and mining lobbies is neutralised** and the government can take a fair decision.”
- He added, “The BJP had promised — not once but twice — that our demands will be met. It was one of their poll promises. They promised us that they would protect the identity of **Ladakh under the sixth schedule**. But sadly, promises have not been kept. **Ladakh has no democratic representation.**”
- Through the protest, Sonam Wangchuk is pushing for four key demands that include **statehood** and implementation of the **Sixth Schedule** of the Constitution in the region.



- The **Constitution's Sixth Schedule** guarantees protections for land and a nominal autonomy for the country's tribal areas. In 2019, as part of its abolition of Jammu and Kashmir's (J&K) special constitutional status, New Delhi granted Union Territory (UT) status to Ladakh. Wangchuk also seeks a separate Lok Sabha seats for Leh and Kargil districts, a recruitment process and a separate Public Service Commission for Ladakh.

What Is The Sixth Schedule

- The Sixth Schedule under **Article 244 of the Indian Constitution** provides for the formation of autonomous administrative regions called Autonomous District Councils (ADCs).



- **ADCs are granted autonomy** on legislative, judicial, and administrative matters within a state. They can have up to **30 members with a term of five years**, and

can make laws, rules and regulations with regard to land, forest, water, agriculture, village councils, health, sanitation, village- and town-level policing, etc.

- Currently, it applies to the northeastern states of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram (three Councils each), and Tripura (one Council).



- The protest comes after the Ladakhi leadership entered into talks with Centre to discuss threadbare the demands for Ladakh's statehood, the inclusion of the **Union Territory in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution** and the setting up of an exclusive public service commission for the high-altitude region. The talks, however, have remained inconclusive so far.