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Ladakh: Capital, Administration, and India’s Cold Desert

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Ladakh: Capital, Administration, and India's Cold Desert

Ladakh is a high mountain Union Territory in northern India. Its cold desert landscape helps explain its settlements, livelihoods and government.

- **Capital:** Leh.
- **Formation:** 31 October 2019, from the former state of Jammu and Kashmir.
- **Government:** A Union Territory without a Legislative Assembly.
- **Districts:** Seven after the April 2026 expansion.
- **Lieutenant Governor:** Vinai Kumar Saxena, checked on 15 October 2026.

Sources: Ladakh profile; Home Ministry; Current LG

1. How did Ladakh become a Union Territory?

A new unit of government in 2019

Ladakh became a **Union Territory on 31 October 2019**. The Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act, 2019 divided the former state into two Union Territories.

Ladakh was separated from the remaining Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir. The two territories have different governing systems.

Jammu and Kashmir has provision for a legislature. **Ladakh has no Legislative Assembly**. So, Union Territory status alone does not tell you whether a territory has an assembly.

Who heads the government?

Ladakh is administered through its Lieutenant Governor under Union government oversight. Vinai Kumar Saxena took oath on **13 March 2026**. He became Ladakh's fourth Lieutenant Governor, succeeding Kavinder Gupta.

A Lieutenant Governor is not a Chief Minister. The first is an appointed head of the Union Territory. A Chief Minister leads a council of ministers in a government with a legislature.

Leh is the capital used in official national profiles. Kargil remains a second major centre of government. Some official service pages call Leh and Kargil joint capitals.

Sources: UT formation; Oath record; Leh study

> **Quick check 1.** Every Union Territory has its own Legislative Assembly. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

2. Why is Ladakh a cold desert?

Cold and dry describe different features

A **cold desert** combines a cold climate with very low rain and snow. A desert does not need to be hot or covered in sand.

Ladakh lies in the Trans-Himalayan region, beyond the Greater Himalayas. The Karakoram lies to the north, while the Zanskar mountains lie to the south.

Ladakh covers about **59,146 square kilometres**. It is India's largest Union Territory by area. Much of the land rises above 3,000 metres, although lower valleys also exist.

High land is colder than low land nearby. The Himalayan mountain barrier helps explain the dryness. The cold and dry climate has two causes. Height explains the cold; the rain shadow explains the lack of rain.

How does the rain shadow work?

Moist air loses much of its moisture while crossing the Himalayan barrier. Ladakh lies on the drier, sheltered side.

So, the summer monsoon supplies little rain to much of Ladakh. Snowfall can still occur. A rain shadow reduces rain and snow; it does not make rain and snow cease.

Moist air Approaches the mountains

→

Himalayan barrier Air rises and loses moisture

→

LadakhDrier air reaches the sheltered side

Conceptual rain shadow sequence. It is not a scale map or a year-round weather forecast.

Compare a wet slope with a dry valley behind a mountain range. The same mountain range can leave one side wet and the other side dry.

Sources: Area and terrain; Cold desert heritage; Cold desert lesson

> **Quick check 2.** Snowfall means Ladakh cannot be a desert. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

3. How did two districts become seven?

Ladakh once had **two districts: Leh and Kargil**. The Ministry of Home Affairs approved five new districts in August 2024.

On **27 April 2026**, the Lieutenant Governor approved the legal order creating those five districts. The new districts were officially launched on 29 April 2026.

From Leh Nubra; Sham; Changthang
Leh remains a district
From Kargil Zanskar; Drass
Kargil remains a district

Two kept districts plus five new districts make seven. The boxes show parent districts, not places on a map.

Names and headquarters

- **Nubra:** Diskit.
- **Sham:** Khaltse.
- **Changthang:** Nyoma.
- **Zanskar:** Padum.
- **Drass:** Drass-Ranbirpura.

The seven districts are Leh, Kargil, Nubra, Sham, Changthang, Zanskar and Drass. Do not count only the five new names.

Why create smaller districts?

A large region can be hard to govern, even when few people live there. Mountains and scattered homes can make journeys to offices long and hard.

New district headquarters are intended to bring government closer to local people. For example, a nearby office can reduce travel for district-level public services.

A new district alone cannot ensure shorter trips or faster services. The new offices need staff, buildings, roads and sound ways to work.

District expansion also does not create a state or a Legislative Assembly. The number of districts and the territory's legal status answer different questions.

Sources: New districts; District launch

> **Quick check 3.** The five new districts replaced Leh and Kargil, leaving five districts overall. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

4. What do the hill councils do?

LAHDC means Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council. The councils give local voice in development planning.

The **Leh council began in 1995**. Its first elections were held on 28 August 1995. Its first meeting followed on 3 September 1995.

The **Kargil council began in 2003**. Both councils thus predate Ladakh's Union Territory status in 2019.

Local planning and UT government differ

Councillors can bring local development needs into the planning process. A remote village's priorities may differ from those of a large town.

Consider a village needing an irrigation channel and a safer access road. Local voices help raise those needs when development work is planned.

A hill council is not Ladakh's Legislative Assembly. Its local development role works within the wider system of government.

Likewise, forming a new district does not by itself create a new autonomous council. District boundaries, council systems and Union Territory status are separate questions about public bodies.

Sources: Leh council; Kargil council; Home Ministry

> **Quick check 4.** The Leh and Kargil hill councils were both created after Ladakh became a Union Territory. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

5. How do landscape and culture shape daily life?

A varied culture and landscape

Ladakh has strong Tibetan-Buddhist cultural links. Hemis and Thiksey are well-known monasteries, also called gompas.

Monasteries connect religious practice with architecture, art and festivals. They help explain why Ladakh's culture and landscape attract visitors.

However, Ladakh's culture varies from place to place. Muslim communities also form a large part of its population and heritage.

Water connects settlements and livelihoods

The Indus and other rivers cut through Ladakh's mountain landscape. Settlements and farmed fields often follow water sources.

Snow and glacier melt help supply streams in the dry region. Access to that water helps explain why farmed land can contrast with bare slopes.

Summer crop growing includes barley, potatoes and peas. Winter leaves less time for crops to grow. Farmers must fit their work into the warmer months.

Livestock and tourism also support livelihoods. Monastery visits and mountain travel connect cultural heritage with income from visitors.

Why local voice matters

Harsh terrain makes local knowledge useful when planning services. Cultural traditions also give local people reasons to seek a voice in development decisions.

Demands for more self-rule began before the 2019 split. The Leh council's creation in 1995 formed part of that earlier local self-rule.

The 2026 district expansion addresses access to public services. It should not be confused with granting every demand for wider self-rule.

Sources: Cold desert heritage; Cold desert lesson; Leh council



View from Thiksey monastery, showing chortens, buildings and fields. Photo: Manoj Grover, Wikimedia Commons; CC BY-SA 4.0. Resized proportionally.

> **Quick check 5.** Ladakh's district expansion by itself gave it a Legislative Assembly. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

6. What did Parliament review in August 2026?

On **7 August 2026**, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs presented its **260th Report**.

The report's title names two separate tasks. Administrative governance, social and economic development and internal security concerned Jammu and Kashmir.

The Ladakh component concerned **border security management and preparedness**. Reading the full title prevents proposals for one territory being assigned to the other.

The proposals included examining aviation facilities near Katra, mineral development, and education and land-rights concerns in Jammu and Kashmir.

Those proposals should not be presented as Ladakh-specific measures. The Jammu and Kashmir lesson gives the related context.

A committee proposal is also different from a completed project. A proposed study or suggested facility does not establish that construction has occurred.

Sources: Parliament's review

7. Your understanding checks

The five checks above test government, climate, districts and councils. Review each explanation before moving to the practice questions.

8. Questions learners often ask

Can a place be snowy and still be a desert?

Yes. A desert receives little rain and snow overall. Snow on high mountains does not mean the region around it receives much rain or snow.

Why are district numbers different in older books?

Older books describe Leh and Kargil as Ladakh's two districts. Five new districts were formed in April 2026. Match the number to the question's date.

Does a hill council make Ladakh a state?

No. Hill councils support local development planning. Ladakh's legal status remains that of a Union Territory.

What is the easiest way to remember the district change?

Keep Leh and Kargil first. Add Nubra, Sham and Changthang from Leh. Then add Zanskar and Drass from Kargil.

10. Practise with 5 MCQs

Apply the lesson to five existing topic questions. Each answer includes an explanation and a link back to the relevant section.

Practice MCQs

1. Which town is listed as Ladakh's capital in the Ministry of Rural Development's UT profile?

A. Srinagar

B. Kargil

C. Leh

D. Zanskar

See answer ↓

2. Ladakh became a Union Territory on 31 October 2019, carved out of which former state?

A. Himachal Pradesh

B. Jammu and Kashmir

C. Punjab

D. Uttarakhand

See answer ↓

3. As of 2026, who is the Lieutenant Governor of Ladakh, and since when?

A. Vinai Kumar Saxena, since 13 March 2026

B. Kavinder Gupta, since 2023

C. Vinai Kumar Saxena, since 2024

D. Manoj Sinha, since 2026

See answer ↓

4. On 27 April 2026, 5 new districts were created in Ladakh.

How many total districts did this give Ladakh?

A. 6

B. 8

C. 7

D. 5

See answer ↓

5. Local governance in Ladakh runs through two Autonomous Hill Development Councils.

Which pair of years were they established?

A. LAHDC Leh (1995) and LAHDC Kargil (2003)

B. LAHDC Leh (2000) and LAHDC Kargil (2010)

C. LAHDC Leh (1990) and LAHDC Kargil (1995)

D. LAHDC Leh (2019) and LAHDC Kargil (2020)

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **C.**
   Leh is the capital named in national government profiles of Ladakh. Kargil is another major administrative centre. Some official services describe the two towns as joint capitals. Zanskar is a district, while Srinagar belongs to Jammu and Kashmir.
   Review Ladakh's capital and administrative structure.
   ↑ Q1
2. **B.**
   The former state of Jammu and Kashmir was reorganised into two Union Territories on 31 October 2019. Ladakh was one of them. Himachal Pradesh, Punjab and Uttarakhand were not divided to form Ladakh. Ladakh has no Legislative Assembly, unlike the arrangement provided for Jammu and Kashmir.
   Review the 2019 reorganisation and its two governing arrangements.
   ↑ Q2
3. **A.**
   Vinai Kumar Saxena took oath as Ladakh's fourth Lieutenant Governor on 13 March 2026. He succeeded Kavinder Gupta. The October 2026 administration record confirms Saxena continued in office. The 2024 date does not mark his Ladakh appointment. Saxena, rather than Sinha, took the Ladakh oath on 13 March 2026.
   Review the Lieutenant Governor's appointment and role.
   ↑ Q3
4. **C.**
   Ladakh had two districts, Leh and Kargil. The April 2026 notification added Sham, Nubra, Changthang, Zanskar and Drass. Adding five to two gives seven. Five counts only the new districts. The districts were formally inaugurated on 29 April, after the notification announcement.
   Review the seven districts and their administrative origins.
   ↑ Q4

5. **A.**
   Leh's hill council began in 1995, while Kargil's began in 2003. Both existed before Ladakh became a Union Territory in 2019. Their purpose concerns local participation in development planning. A hill council is not the same institution as a Legislative Assembly. The other year pairs do not match the councils' establishment records.
   Review the hill councils and their local planning role.
   ↑ Q5

Quick-check answers

1. **False.** Ladakh has no Legislative Assembly. Jammu and Kashmir has provision for one, despite also being a Union Territory. ↑ 1
2. **False.** Desert conditions concern low precipitation. A cold desert can receive snow while remaining dry overall. ↑ 2
3. **False.** Leh and Kargil remain districts. Adding five to the original two gives seven. ↑ 3
4. **False.** Leh's council began in 1995 and Kargil's in 2003. Ladakh became a Union Territory in 2019. ↑ 4
5. **False.** Districts organise administration. Ladakh remains a Union Territory without a Legislative Assembly. ↑ 5

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