



## **Ladakh Diary: Why India needs to improve infrastructure along the LAC**

**Speaker: Nitin A. Gokhale, Commentator, Author and Media Trainer**

**Chair: Jabin T. Jacob, Assistant Director, Institute of Chinese Studies**

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Nitin A. Gokhale, a famous Journalist, shed light on the importance of infrastructure along the LAC areas, which is presently absent. He had covered the Kargil War in 1999 and travelled extensively to Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim. In introducing Ladakhi terrain, the speaker began with a description of Pangong Lake, which he mentioned is the most beautiful tourist destination in Ladakh. Ladakh can be literally translated as 'land of high passes' in Tibetan. It is squeezed between the Kunlun Mountain on the north and the Himalayas to the south. Khartungla Pass is among the highest motorable roads situated at an altitude of 5,360 meters. Kargil is the second largest town in Ladakh. There are three main infantry divisions that deal with intrusions along the Line of Control (LoC) from Mashkoh, Dras, Batalik to Turtuk. Most of the villages in Ladakh are sparsely populated. Zaskar is a sub-district of Kargil and one of the remotest parts of Ladakh. In winter, Zaskar is accessible only by foot over frozen river.

India really needs to spend more time and money to deal with the internal as well as external security threats near the LAC. Mr Nitin Gokhale as a journalist has tried his best to present first-hand information regarding the present situation along the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

### **Grievances**

The speaker focused on many problems and challenges faced by the Ladakhis living along the LAC. Lack of good infrastructure in the LAC area has primarily affected people's standard of living. The speaker made a deliberate effort to focus on structural problems existing in the border

region. Vested interests played a critical role. There is a nexus between contractors and the local authorities. Civilians are not allowed in every place. Since there is no infrastructure, local residents have been pushed as far as 50 to 60 kilometres from the border making the region susceptible to outside forces. People along the border have been pushed back because of deficiency in development. The Army has taken over many lands. Civil administration is poor while there are restrictions on border management. People have been persistently complaining about it. In Chushul, nothing has changed significantly since the 1960s. There is only a single bus that goes once in a week to Leh. In case of an accident there is no immediate help and rescue mechanism. Also, man power is poor, thus, hampering development in every sense. The Indian army's Chushul Division had conducted a medical and veterinary camp in Hemiya village for the treatment of local villagers and their live stocks.

He listed some of the problems: no electricity, no bus service, no school, no internet communication etc. Before three years, entire Leh was being powered through the help of generators. Now surplus electricity is there but still, it is yet to reach distant places. After six in the evening, people in the remotest areas live in darkness. As urban residents, we tend to take basic amenities of life for granted. Although tourism has increased and people have started to travel to these regions for adventure and the thrill of it. But for those living in the region, the hardship is too much to be bear on a daily basis. In this way, the speaker analysed both the positive and negative aspects. He went on to mention that there are basically three brigades looking after this area. India's lack of road and rail on its side will emasculate Delhi's capacity on the LAC.

### **Problems in infrastructure building**

The speaker also highlighted various views and scepticisms regarding India's infrastructure development along the LAC. Firstly, India has a very poor connectivity to the LAC. Difficult terrain and hostile weather conditions in the Himalayas make it difficult to reach road building targets. Not only are the targets unrealistic, much of the required land is held jointly by tribal communities, complicating its acquisition for border road construction. Further, India has altogether a different perception towards border infrastructure.

Environmental Clearances: Existence of many wild life sanctuaries and National Parks makes acquisition of environmental clearances from the state a difficult job. In some cases, getting clearances has taken more than 10 years. The vital issue of infrastructure development has become captive to our own rules and regulations.

Land acquisition: The central government has been lethargic in acquiring land essentially for infrastructure development in border region.

Funding: Funding has been a major stumbling block. Massive amount of expenditure is required on an annual basis. Improvement of rail infrastructure in the border area is not progressing well. The speaker argued that Border Roads Organization (BRO) should be refurbished, which come under Ministry of Defense. BRO needs to take active part in undertaking road construction in these unreceptive areas. Patrolling has been a tedious because of no roads in high altitude in border areas. Basic amenities are not present.

### **What needs to be done?**

There is no doubt that progress is happening but at snail's pace. For example, Trishul division has tried to increase basic amenities to the civil population in remote areas of Eastern Ladakh which include medical and veterinary camps, running women empowerment centers, and so on. The speaker made a number of suggestions: 1) Solar energy required to be tapped, 2) Clarity on LAC should be a priority, 3) Eco-friendly tourist facilities, and 4) India has to do more to maintain peace and tranquility in the border region. India has proclaimed that 54 new border outposts will be created and 175 crore packages have been announced for beefing up infrastructure along the border in Arunachal Pradesh. India has to enhance the deployment of troops, renovate the Indo-Tibetan Border Police etc. The speaker also acknowledged the present efforts by the Indian Government to improve the situation. The government has made a decision to fast-track clearances for border roads and railway lines by relaxing environmental norms. Recently the BRO has also been authorized to engage outside expert agencies in the building of technologically-intensive border roads.

*Report prepared by Chandan Panigrahi, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies.*

## **About the Speaker**

Nitin A. Gokhale a well-known commentator on national security affairs, author and media trainer. A former journalist with 32 years of experience across print, web and broadcast mediums, he has specialised in reporting from conflict zones and inaccessible, remote areas. Perhaps the only Indian journalist to have reported the 1999 Kargil skirmish and the Eelam War 4 in Sri Lanka, he has travelled extensively in Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Ladakh, Myanmar and Tibet.

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