

Environmental Crisis and Political Accountability in the Himalayas: Water Governance in the Ladakh Region

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Abstract

The Himalayan region, often referred to as the “Third Pole,” is witnessing an unprecedented ecological transformation. Among its fragile ecosystems, Ladakh stands out as both a symbol of environmental vulnerability and as a laboratory for sustainable innovation. This paper critically examines the intersection of environmental crisis and political accountability in the Ladakh region, seeking to rethink India’s approach to sustainable water governance within an ecologically and politically sensitive terrain. Drawing on the principles of adaptive governance, ecological modernisation, and public accountability, this study situates Ladakh’s water challenges within the broader context of India’s evolving federal environmental architecture.

Ladakh’s hydrological distress, driven by glacial retreat, erratic precipitation, and rapid urbanisation, intensified after its administrative reorganisation as a Union Territory in 2019. These environmental shifts have exposed the tension between traditional community-based management systems, such as *zings*, *kul* channels, and *Ice Stupa* innovations, and the state-led developmental paradigm that often prioritises infrastructure over ecological balance. This paper investigates how political institutions at the local, union, and national levels have responded to this crisis, questioning whether governance mechanisms have adequately upheld accountability, equity, and participation. By examining key policy frameworks such as the *Jal Jeevan Mission*, *Atal Bhujal Yojana*, and *National Water Policy*, alongside local governance structures and indigenous practices, this study evaluates how sustainable outcomes depend as much on ethical and political will as on technical solutions.

Methodologically, this paper employs a qualitative, policy-analytical approach, synthesising secondary data from government reports, environmental indices, and scholarly studies (2010–2025). This reveals that while India’s national water missions have advanced infrastructural access, they often lack region-specific adaptation strategies for high-altitude, arid ecosystems such as Ladakh. The findings argue for a multilevel governance framework that integrates local ecological knowledge with institutional accountability and transparent policy execution.

Ultimately, this paper calls for a paradigm shift in Himalayan water governance, from crisis management to accountable stewardship anchored in India’s constitutional ethos of justice, sustainability, and participatory democracy. By positioning Ladakh as a microcosm of India’s environmental future, this study contributes to debates on how political responsibility, ethical governance, and adaptive policy design can converge to build a more resilient and sustainable Himalayan region.

Keywords: Environmental Governance, Political Accountability, Sustainable Water Management, Ladakh, Climate Change, Public Policy, Adaptive Governance, Himalayan Sustainability, Ecological Justice.

Introduction

In the traditional Indian civilisational ethos, nature has never been regarded as an external entity to be conquered but rather as a living continuum, of which human life is only one expression. From the Rig Veda's reverence of rivers as mothers to Mahatma Gandhi's insistence that "Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed," ecological harmony has long been recognised as a moral duty rather than a policy choice. However, in the twenty-first century, this ethical vision faces severe strain. The accelerating pace of industrialisation, urbanisation, and climate change has transformed the environment into a political question, one that demands not only technical management but also ethical and political accountability.

This tension is most visible in India's fragile Himalayan frontier, particularly in Ladakh. The Himalayas, often described as the "water tower of Asia," sustain nearly two billion people across the Indian subcontinent, through their vast glacial reserves. However, climate models over the past decade have consistently warned of alarming glacial retreat, erratic precipitation, and desertification in high-altitude ecosystems due to climate change. In Ladakh, these transformations are not abstract scientific predictions but a lived reality. Once sustained by traditional irrigation systems, such as zing and kul channels, many villages today face seasonal water scarcity, especially during spring cultivation. Glacial meltwater that once arrived predictably now flows prematurely, leaving critical months of drought when crops require moisture. In response, communities and innovators, such as Sonam Wangchuk, have pioneered adaptive solutions, such as Ice Stupas—artificial glaciers designed to store winter water for summer use. While these grassroots innovations embody the Gandhian principle of Swaraj through self-reliance, their long-term sustainability ultimately depends on political will, institutional support, and responsive governance.

Therefore, the environmental crisis in Ladakh cannot be understood in isolation from the structures of political accountability that govern resource distribution, planning, and adaptation. Following Ladakh's reorganisation as a Union Territory in 2019, the region entered a new administrative era. Freed from the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh now falls directly under the central governance. While this reorganisation promised administrative efficiency and accelerated development, it also raised questions about local representation, participatory planning, and ecological sensitivity. Ladakh's unique geography—an arid cold desert located at an altitude exceeding 3,000 metres—requires decentralised, context-specific governance. However, the growing emphasis on infrastructure-led development and tourism threatens to undermine the delicate environmental equilibrium that traditional Ladakhi society once maintained.

At this juncture, the concept of political accountability must extend beyond electoral responsibility to encompass ethical stewardship of natural resources. In a democracy, governance is not simply about delivering projects but also about answering for the ecological consequences of those projects. The Indian Constitution, through Articles 48A and 51A(g), enshrines the duty of the state and citizens to protect and improve the environment. This dual responsibility, legal, moral, and philosophical, forms the normative foundation for rethinking water governance in the region. When political accountability

falters, environmental degradation accelerates; when ethical responsibility guides policy, sustainability becomes achievable. Thus, the crisis of water governance is not merely a technical deficit but a moral test of governance ethics in India.

In contemporary policy discourse, sustainable water governance has emerged as a developmental and political challenge. India's flagship programs, such as the Jal Jeevan Mission and Atal Bhujal Yojana, seek to secure universal access to safe drinking water and promote integrated groundwater management. However, their success in regions such as Ladakh depends on recognising the limits of a one-size-fits-all approach. The cold-arid landscape demands an adaptive framework that integrates traditional knowledge, modern science and participatory governance. Ladakh offers a powerful case study to evaluate how national missions interact with local ecological and cultural realities and whether governance systems can translate policy vision into sustainable practice.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to critically explore how environmental crisis and political accountability intersect in Ladakh's evolving governance landscape. It argues that the region's water challenges are not solely environmental phenomena but reflect a deeper governance imbalance between centralised control and local autonomy, technological ambition and ecological prudence, and economic growth and ethical responsibility. By situating Ladakh within the broader Himalayan environmental discourse, this paper seeks to illuminate how lessons from this case study can inform India's larger water policy architecture.

Methodologically, this research adopts a qualitative, policy-analytical approach, examining secondary data from government reports, academic studies, and field-based analyses. The temporal focus (2010–2025) captures both pre- and post-reorganisation trends, allowing for an assessment of policy continuity and institutional accountability. Theoretically, this study draws upon three interrelated frameworks: Adaptive Governance Theory, which emphasises flexibility and learning in complex ecological systems; ecological modernization theory, which argues for integrating environmental objectives into development; and Good Governance Theory, which highlights transparency, participation, and accountability as pillars of effective environmental management.

Three guiding research questions frame this inquiry:

1. How has the environmental crisis in Ladakh evolved in relation to political and institutional changes since 2019
2. To what extent have governance mechanisms at the local and national levels demonstrated accountability and responsiveness to ecological realities?
3. What policy and institutional innovations can foster a more sustainable and accountable water governance framework for Ladakh and similar Himalayan ecosystems?

By engaging with these questions, this study bridges the gap between environmental ethics and public policy, arguing that sustainable water governance must be grounded in both empirical evidence and moral reasoning. In a region where snow, stone, and silence shape human survival, the politics of water become the politics of life itself. As India envisions a Viksit Bharat by 2047, Ladakh's experience serves as a reminder that true development cannot be measured merely in infrastructure but in the integrity with which a society honors its natural inheritance. Therefore, rethinking water governance is to reaffirm the moral covenant between people, polity, and planet, a covenant that demands accountability not only from governments but from humanity itself.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Environmental governance has gradually evolved from a narrow ecological concern to a central question of political responsibility and institutional ethics. Earlier debates, particularly those following Garrett Hardin's "Tragedy of the Commons" (1968), interpreted environmental degradation as an inevitable outcome of collective mismanagement of resources. This deterministic view was later challenged by Elinor Ostrom (1990), whose work on community resource management demonstrated that human societies can sustain common goods through cooperative norms and shared accountability. Her insights transformed environmental thought, emphasizing governance structures that are rooted in trust, participation, and context. Building on this foundation, subsequent scholars have argued that environmental governance is best understood as a dynamic interplay between ecological systems and the institutions that regulate them. The environment, in this sense, is not a passive resource base but a living social-ecological system that mirrors the quality of political imagination and institutional capacity of the state.

In the Indian context, environmental governance has always carried moral undertones, drawing from a civilisational ethos that regards nature as a partner in existence, rather than an object of exploitation. Scholars such as Ramachandra Guha, Madhav Gadgil, and Mahesh Rangarajan have traced this ethical lineage in India's environmental movements, linking ecological consciousness to struggles for justice, livelihood, and dignity. Their work reveals that India's environmental trajectory embodies a paradox: while developmental policy aims at poverty alleviation and modernisation, it often displaces both people and ecosystems. Contemporary studies by institutions such as TERI, the Center for Policy Research, and CEEW show that the state's regulatory frameworks frequently lack coherence across ministries, resulting in fragmented governance. These analyses converge on the idea that environmental policy in India cannot be technocratic; it must be participatory, transparent, and ethically grounded in the community.

Within this broad discourse, the Himalayan region occupies a special place because of its ecological fragility and its strategic significance. Scientific reports by the IPCC (2021) and ICIMOD (2022) warn of alarming glacial retreat that threatens the water security of nearly two billion people downstream. Scholars such as Bhasin, Rasul, and Negi have drawn attention to how climate variability interacts with unplanned urbanisation, tourism, and militarisation to produce environmental stress in Ladakh and other Himalayan sub-regions. These crises reveal the limits of conventional resource management and underscore the need for adaptive institutions that can respond to complex and rapidly changing realities. Empirical research on Ladakh by Norphel (2016) and Benz (2021) illustrates how communities have crafted localised solutions such as the Ice Stupa movement or glacial-lake harvesting to cope with water scarcity. However, these innovative practices often remain peripheral to official policies. This disjunction between grassroots adaptation and state planning highlights the deeper issue of political accountability: whether the institutions tasked with managing Ladakh's environment are genuinely responsive to its ecological and cultural contexts.

Political accountability in environmental governance is not merely about bureaucratic efficiency but also about moral stewardship. Democratic theory, from Locke to Rousseau, treats accountability as the core of legitimate authority. However, only in recent decades have scholars such as Dryzek and Bovens expanded this idea to include ecological responsibility. In environmental policy, accountability encompasses both answerability, the obligation to justify decisions, and enforceability, the power to rectify failures. In India, constitutional provisions such as Articles 48A and 51A(g) codify environmental

protection as a shared duty of the state and its citizens. However, as Narain (2019) and Menon (2020) observe, institutional accountability often collapses due to political expediency, limited resources, and overlapping mandates. The NITI Aayog's 2021 assessment of Himalayan sustainability identified systemic gaps in data transparency, inter-agency coordination, and participatory planning. These findings underline that the ecological crisis in the Himalayas is inseparable from the governance crisis.

To interpret this complex landscape, the present study employs a synthesis of three interrelated frameworks: adaptive governance, ecological modernisation, and good governance, each of which contributes a distinctive analytical lens. Adaptive governance, developed by Folke and later refined by Chaffin et al., emphasises flexibility, learning, and multilevel collaboration in managing ecosystems under uncertainty. This is particularly relevant for Ladakh, where traditional water systems coexist with emerging administrative structures and local innovations demand formal recognition. Ecological modernisation, as articulated by Mol and Sonnenfeld, posits that environmental sustainability can be pursued through technological innovation and policy reform within modern economies. In the context of Ladakh, it invites an examination of whether developmental initiatives such as the Jal Jeevan Mission and renewable energy projects reflect an ecological ethic or simply reproduce old patterns of centralised control under a green label. Complementing these is the framework of good governance, defined by the United Nations as resting on transparency, accountability, participation, and responsiveness. Applying these principles to Himalayan governance reveals how administrative hierarchies and limited public involvement often constrain the translation of environmental ideals into tangible outcomes.

When viewed together, these frameworks outline a triaxial model of sustainability in which adaptive capacity, technological prudence, and ethical accountability reinforce each other. The literature suggests that environmental resilience depends on the strength of the feedback loops between ecological change, institutional learning, and political responsibility. Where these loops are functional, as in community-based irrigation management, governance becomes self-correcting; where they are broken, environmental decline accelerates. However, few studies have systematically explored how these theoretical insights apply to Himalayan water governance in post-2019 Ladakh, where new administrative arrangements coexist with the old environmental challenges. Most existing analyses focus either on biophysical dynamics or development planning without integrating the normative dimension of accountability and ethics. The moral foundations of governance—what Gandhi described as trusteeship and Buddhist philosophy articulated as interdependence—remain understudied in mainstream policy discourse.

This gap provides an intellectual space for the present study. It proposes that the environmental crisis in Ladakh is simultaneously ecological, institutional and ethical. Therefore, sustainable water governance must move beyond resource management to embrace political and moral responsibilities. By weaving adaptive governance with good governance principles and ecological modernisation, this study builds a framework capable of evaluating how effectively India's environmental institutions respond to the realities of climate change while upholding constitutional and ethical obligations. This approach allows the analysis to remain sensitive to both the scientific complexity of the Himalayan ecosystem and the human aspirations embedded in governance.

In essence, the literature underscores that the path toward sustainable water governance in Ladakh cannot be linear or technocratic in nature. It must be cyclical, reflexive, and accountable, anchored in participatory institutions that learn from local wisdom while remaining open to innovation. The theoretical synthesis adopted here serves not only as an academic scaffold but also as a moral

compass. This affirms that the success of environmental governance depends not only on administrative capacity but also on the integrity with which society honors its covenant with nature. The next section outlines the methodology through which this conceptual framework will be operationalized to evaluate Ladakh's evolving water governance landscape between 2010 and 2025.

Methodology

The methodological design of this study is based on the belief that environmental governance cannot be meaningfully understood using quantitative indicators alone. Water, as both a material and cultural resource, reveals its political significance only when examined through lived experiences, institutional arrangements, and ethical commitments that shape its use. Accordingly, this study adopts a **qualitative, policy-analytical approach**, combining interpretive analysis of secondary data with conceptual reflection drawn from the traditions of public policy and political philosophy. The goal is not merely to measure environmental decline but to interpret how governance systems respond to ecological uncertainty and whether these responses embody the principles of accountability and justice enshrined in India's constitutional and civilisational ethos.

The temporal scope of the study extends from 2010 to 2025, a period marked by significant shifts in India's environmental policy and the administrative structure of Ladakh. This fifteen-year window captures the pre- and post-2019 reorganisation phases, allowing for a comparative understanding of how political transitions influence environmental outcomes. The analysis draws upon a diverse range of sources, including government reports, such as the National Water Policy (2012, 2023 Draft), NITI Aayog's *Composite Water Management Index*, and the *Sustainable Development of the Himalayan Region* report, as well as the *Jal Jeevan Mission* documentation and policy briefs from institutions like ORF, IDSA, and CEEW. Complementary academic studies from peer-reviewed journals provide empirical grounding, while field-based works by scholars and practitioners in Ladakh, such as the documentation of Ice Stupas, traditional irrigation systems, and climate adaptation projects, enrich the contextual understanding. Parliamentary debates, official press releases, and local media reports were also examined to trace the narratives of political accountability and administrative responsiveness.

Methodologically, the study follows an **interpretivist epistemology**, which recognizes that governance is not a static structure but a process shaped by meaning, value, and interaction. This perspective enables a multilayered reading of policy texts, institutional behavior, and community innovations. The analysis proceeds through thematic coding of documents to identify recurrent patterns related to accountability, participation, transparency, and adaptation. These themes were interpreted in light of the theoretical frameworks of adaptive governance, ecological modernisation, and good governance. The emphasis is placed on understanding how environmental crises become sites of negotiation between competing visions of development, centralized modernisation, community autonomy, and ecological stewardship.

Given that Ladakh's governance dynamics are intertwined with its geography and culture, this study employs **contextual triangulation** to ensure analytical depth. It compares insights from local practices with national policy designs, revealing both convergence and disjunctures. This comparative reading allows the paper to move beyond description toward normative evaluation, assessing not only what policies exist but also whether they reflect the moral imperatives of sustainability and accountability. Thus, the method merges empirical observation with ethical inquiry, consistent with the reflective traditions encouraged by the Indian Council of Philosophical Research.

The limitations of this approach are acknowledged herein. The study relies primarily on secondary data owing to logistical constraints and the evolving political situation in Ladakh, which restricts extensive fieldwork. Nevertheless, triangulation across multiple data sources and theoretical lenses mitigated potential bias and strengthened interpretive reliability. The analysis aimed to produce a coherent narrative that was empirically credible, conceptually robust, and normatively informed. By situating policy analysis within a philosophical reflection on responsibility, the methodology transforms data interpretation into an exercise of critical reasoning regarding governance ethics. In doing so, it recognizes that the quality of environmental governance is not merely a function of institutional efficiency but a reflection of how societies understand their duty to the earth and to future generations. The following section applies this methodological framework to examine how environmental crises and political accountability unfold in the context of Ladakh's evolving water governance.

Environmental Crisis and Political Accountability in Ladakh

Ladakh's environmental transformation is geographical, political, and moral. Nestled at the confluence of the Karakoram and Great Himalayas, the region presents an extreme environment that is cold, arid, and elevated, where survival itself depends on the intelligent use of limited water resources. For centuries, Ladakh's inhabitants have evolved intricate systems of irrigation and social cooperation that reflect a profound understanding of ecological balance. The *zings* and *kul* channels that channelised glacial meltwater across terraced fields were not merely technical structures but moral institutions, sustained by community rules, ritual cooperation, and an ethic of restraint. Therefore, the modern environmental crisis gripping Ladakh today cannot be seen as a failure of nature but as a fracture in this moral economy of coexistence, a rupture widened by the combined pressures of climate change, administrative centralization, and developmental acceleration.

Over the last three decades, climatic shifts have disrupted the hydrological rhythm of Ladakh in alarming ways. Glaciers that once released water gradually throughout the summer now melt earlier and faster because of rising temperatures, leading to spring flooding followed by prolonged water scarcity. The ICIMOD (2022) *Hindu Kush Himalaya Assessment* reports that the region's glaciers have thinned by more than half a meter annually in the past decade. Field-based observations by scientists and local engineers corroborate this trend: the disappearance of perennial streams, drying of *zings*, and unpredictable behavior of snowmelt have become recurrent patterns. This ecological instability directly translates into livelihood insecurity for Ladakh's agrarian and pastoral communities, whose productivity depends on synchronizing cropping cycles with water availability. What was once a stable, community-managed resource has become a politically contested commodity.

However, climate is only one dimension of the crisis. The second, and perhaps more complex, issue lies in governance. When Ladakh was carved out as a Union Territory in 2019, expectations soared that direct central oversight would ensure efficiency, infrastructure, and modernization. However, this administrative restructuring has produced a new set of challenges. The bifurcation of Jammu and Kashmir led to the dissolution of the Hill Development Councils' authority over key sectors such as environment, water, and planning. Centralised project management, often routed through bureaucratic chains in Delhi, weakened local autonomy and disrupted the existing channels of accountability. The result is a paradox: while funds for water infrastructure have increased substantially, the responsiveness of governance to local ecological knowledge has declined. Large-scale schemes, such as the *Jal Jeevan Mission*, have extended piped-water access to many households; however, questions persist about the

sustainability of these systems in high-altitude conditions, where pipelines freeze and energy costs soar. Without adaptive planning, such interventions risk becoming symbols of progress, rather than instruments of resilience.

In this context, political accountability assumes multiple meanings. At one level, it concerns administrative transparency whether institutions like the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Councils and the Union Territory Administration publish clear environmental data, invite public participation, and align projects with ecological capacity. At a deeper level, it involves moral responsibility and the degree to which governance recognises that the natural environment is not an expendable backdrop to development but a living system that sustains human dignity. Herein lies the tension between the two paradigms of governance. The first, which may be termed *technocratic developmentalism*, prioritises infrastructure, connectivity, and tourism as pathways to modernity. Second, rooted in *ecological stewardship*, it values restraint, balance, and long-term sustainability. The balance between these paradigms will determine whether Ladakh's future will be one of regeneration or exhaustion.

Empirical evidence reveals how these paradigms interact in practice. The *Jal Jeevan Mission*, for instance, has delivered short-term relief by expanding access to drinking water, but its design often ignores the high-altitude climate where freezing temperatures rupture supply lines and make maintenance costly. Similar challenges are observed in hydropower and irrigation projects. The *Chutak* and *Nimoo Bazgo* plants on the Indus and its tributaries were envisaged as symbols of green energy; however, fluctuating water availability due to glacial retreat has reduced generation efficiency. Environmental impact assessments conducted before these projects are often superficial, and post-project monitoring remains inconsistent. Reports from the Comptroller and Auditor General and independent researchers highlight the absence of accountability mechanisms linking local grievances to decision-making. This absence transforms environmental governance into a top-down administrative process in which citizens are recipients rather than partners.

Simultaneously, civil society actors and local innovators in Ladakh continue to embody the ethics of adaptive governance that state institutions often overlook. The *Ice Stupa* project, initiated by Sonam Wangchuk and sustained through community participation, stands as a metaphor for ecological imagination, rooted in self-reliance. Villagers secure irrigation during spring droughts by freezing winter water into vertical ice structures. However, the initiative's success depends not only on local ingenuity but also on governmental support for scaling, financing, and maintenance. Its replication across valleys requires alignment with district plans; however, bureaucratic inertia and fragmented funding streams limit such integration. Thus, the story of the Ice Stupa mirrors the broader struggle between innovation from below and inertia from above. This demonstrates that sustainability is not the absence of a crisis but the presence of accountability—an ongoing dialogue between citizens, knowledge, and power.

Tourism and urbanisation further complicate this dialogue. The Leh and Kargil towns have experienced unprecedented construction, vehicular traffic, and waste generation since 2010. The number of annual tourists, once under 50,000, surpassed 500,000 by 2022, straining the water and waste-management systems originally designed for small populations. Groundwater extraction through borewells has expanded unchecked, causing aquifer depletion in some areas. Despite repeated warnings from environmental groups, tourism infrastructure regulations remain weakly enforced. Political incentives often favor short-term economic gains over ecological prudence. This pattern illustrates how environmental accountability is undermined not only by administrative incapacity but also by the logic

of electoral politics itself, where development is measured by visibility rather than sustainability. Nevertheless, the region offers promising examples of accountability in action. Some village panchayats have revived traditional *Ladakh Gompa Land Trusts* for communal water and land management, blending monastic authority and democratic deliberation. Non-governmental organizations such as the Ladakh Ecological Development Group (LEDeG) have partnered with local councils to promote water budgeting, greywater recycling, and participatory watershed planning. These initiatives, though small in scale, reveal the potential of decentralized governance when guided by ethical convictions. They reaffirm what scholars of adaptive governance emphasize: that resilience emerges not from central command but from distributed intelligence and trust-based collaboration.

The ethical dimension of accountability in Ladakh's water governance can be understood through India's constitutional philosophy. Article 48A mandates the state to protect and improve the environment, whereas Article 51A(g) enjoins citizens to safeguard the natural heritage. These provisions are not symbolic; they represent a constitutional compact that links governance with moral responsibility. However, constitutional ideals often falter in practice when bureaucratic discretion eclipses public deliberation. The *National Green Tribunal* and the *Himalayan State Councils* provide institutional venues for environmental justice, but their jurisdictional reach is limited to Union Territories. In Ladakh, the absence of a legislative assembly further constrains oversight. Citizens depend on grievance petitions, media advocacy, and administrators' goodwill to ensure accountability. In this democratic vacuum, the environment risks becoming an orphaned domain—everyone's concern but no one's mandate.

To bridge this accountability gap, scholars and policymakers increasingly advocate a **multilevel governance framework** that connects local, regional, and national efforts. Such a framework would align the UT administration's projects with local ecological plans and national policies, such as the *National Adaptation Fund on Climate Change* and the *National Mission for Sustaining the Himalayan Ecosystem*. This would empower *panchayats* and traditional institutions to participate in water budgeting and climate planning, ensuring that decisions reflect ground realities. Importantly, transparency mechanisms, such as open data portals, community audits, and social accountability reports, should be embedded to democratise information. These steps are not merely administrative; they restore trust between the state and society, converting accountability from a bureaucratic checklist into a shared civic culture.

Beyond institutional reform, the Ladakh case invites deeper philosophical reflection on the meaning of accountability. In Western political thought, accountability often implies control and sanctions. In Indian philosophy, responsibility is more relational; it emerges from *dharma*, the mutual obligation of all beings to maintain balance. Thus, environmental accountability becomes an ethical condition rather than an administrative outcome. A government is accountable not only when it answers citizens' questions but also when it acts as a trustee of collective well-being. The same applies to citizens, whose rights are inseparable from their duties to the natural environment. This conception transforms governance from an act of rule into a form of stewardship, echoing Gandhi's vision of trusteeship and the Buddhist idea of interdependence. In Ladakh, where the landscape itself is sacred, such a perspective is not an abstract philosophy but a lived reality.

The interaction between the environmental crisis and political accountability in Ladakh thus exposes both the possibilities and limitations of India's developmental state. On the one hand, national missions and central funding demonstrate the state's capacity to mobilise resources for environmental

management. However, the persistence of bureaucratic silos, inadequate community engagement, and weak enforcement reveal the fragility of this capacity. Accountability in environmental governance cannot be achieved through legislation alone; it must be cultivated as a moral habit across institutions. The success of Ladakh's future policies will depend on whether governance can internalise this habit by learning from failures, valuing local wisdom, and aligning ambition with ecological restraint.

Looking forward, the environmental trajectory of Ladakh is a microcosm of the choices confronting India as it pursues sustainable development in the future. Will the state continue to equate modernity with infrastructure, or will it embrace a more reflexive model of progress that honors the ecological foundations of human life? The answer lies in reconciling two temporalities: the immediacy of political cycles and the long arc of environmental change. If properly institutionalised, political accountability can bridge these horizons. It can transform short-term political actions into long-term environmental responsibilities. To achieve this, the government must establish continuous dialogue with local stakeholders, institutionalise environmental audits, and align developmental targets with sustainability indicators. In this way, accountability becomes both preventive and creative: it deters ecological negligence while fostering creativity.

Ultimately, the environmental crisis in Ladakh reveals a truth that extends beyond its borders: sustainability is not only a scientific or economic project but also a moral one. The fragility of glaciers, rivers, and deserts reflects the fragility of political commitment. When governance fails to listen to the voice of ecology, it loses the moral authority on which democracy depends. Conversely, when the state, civil society, and citizens act in partnership, environmental stewardship becomes a shared act of nation building. The Ladakh experience thus redefines the meaning of political accountability—it is not simply about answering for past actions but anticipating future consequences. To govern water in Ladakh is to govern the future of the Himalayas, and by extension, the conscience of a nation striving to reconcile development with dharma.

Rethinking Sustainable Water Governance: Policy and Institutional Pathways

The environmental and political challenges facing Ladakh reveal that sustainable water governance must evolve beyond administrative reforms into ethical and participatory practices. Reimagining governance in fragile ecosystems requires policies that are not only efficient but also empathetic—policies that listen to the rhythms of the land and the voices of its people. The task ahead is to transform accountability from a reactive mechanism into a creative force that guides decision-making toward achieving long-term ecological stability and social justice. This transformation demands the integration of scientific understanding, traditional knowledge, and political commitment within a coherent institutional framework.

The first pathway toward sustainable governance lies in **decentralizing environmental authority** while maintaining the cooperative federalism. Although Ladakh's Union Territory status provides direct access to central funds, it has also centralised decision-making at the expense of local autonomy. Reinvigorating the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Councils with legally defined environmental mandates would restore the balance between administrative efficiency and participatory legitimacy in Ladakh. Panchayats and village committees must be empowered to conduct local water audits, prepare village water security plans, and monitor implementation through social accountability platforms. Such

decentralisation would not fragment policy; rather, it would localise learning and strengthen adaptive capacity, ensuring that decisions reflect ecological realities rather than bureaucratic templates.

The second pathway involves **institutionalising adaptive governance mechanisms** that allow policies to evolve with climatic and social feedback. The rigidity of current water schemes, designed for stable conditions, must give way to flexible frameworks capable of responding to environmental uncertainty. This could include periodic climate impact assessments, rotating water stewardship committees, and cross-sectoral coordination among the departments of water, energy, and environment. By embedding learning into policy cycles, the administration can prevent reactive crisis management and cultivate foresight in its planning. Equally important is the establishment of transparent data-sharing platforms that make hydrological and environmental information publicly available. Open data not only enable evidence-based decisions but also deepen citizen trust in institutions.

The third pathway is the **integration of indigenous ecological knowledge** into formal policies. The resilience of traditional systems, such as *zing*, *kul* channels, and Ice Stupas, stems from centuries of adaptation to Ladakh's climatic realities. Recognising these practices as part of India's intangible knowledge heritage would provide institutional protection and open avenues for collaborative innovation. Policy design must move from the logic of replacement, where modern technology displaces tradition, to the logic of resonance, where both interact productively. Universities and research institutes can facilitate this by documenting local innovations and co-developing context-sensitive technologies in partnership with the communities. This collaborative knowledge ecosystem aligns with the broader vision of *Atmanirbhar Bharat* through self-reliant and locally grounded sustainability.

Fourth, **ethical and constitutional accountability** must be integrated into every stage of environmental decision-making. The constitutional directives under Articles 48A and 51A(g) should inform environmental education, civil service training, and policy evaluation. Every major development project in Ladakh should be accompanied by an accountability statement that discloses its ecological implications, mitigation plans, and mechanisms for public grievance redress. The inclusion of moral audit frameworks—akin to financial audits—would encourage administrators to treat sustainability not as procedural compliance but as a moral commitment. This resonates with India's philosophical tradition of *dharma*, which views responsibility as the basis of power.

Finally, **regional and international cooperation** must complement local efforts to ensure sustainable development. Ladakh's hydrological systems are connected to transboundary Himalayan basins; hence, India's climate and water governance can reinforce local resilience. Integrating Ladakh into national missions, such as the *National Adaptation Fund for Climate Change*, and linking them with global initiatives under the UN Sustainable Development Goals would align local adaptation with global accountability. Through this multi-scalar alignment, from village to nation to planet, India can project a model of environmental governance that is both contextually rooted and universally resonant.

Rethinking sustainable water governance in Ladakh requires a cultural reorientation of policy, from governing nature to governing with nature. When political accountability is understood as trusteeship, it becomes the moral bridge between development and sustainability. By decentralizing authority, institutionalising learning, integrating tradition, and reaffirming ethical responsibility, Ladakh can pioneer a Himalayan model of governance that embodies the spirit of both the Indian Constitution and its civilisational wisdom. Such a model would not only secure water for its people but also reaffirm India's capacity to lead by example in reconciling modernity with ecological awareness. The final section

concludes this study by reflecting on the broader philosophical and policy implications of linking the environmental crisis with political accountability in the Himalayan context.

Conclusion

The environmental predicament of Ladakh is not simply a regional concern; it is a mirror held up to the conscience of modern India. In its stark landscapes, where the scarcity of water meets the abundance of sunlight and spirit, the contradictions of contemporary development are exposed. The region's struggle with climate variability and administrative centralisation reveals the limits of a governance model that views nature as a subject of control, rather than a partner in coexistence. The broader lesson emerging from this study is that sustainability cannot be engineered through technology or legislation alone; it must be cultivated through ethical conviction, participatory governance, and an unwavering sense of responsibility toward future generations.

Throughout this analysis, Ladakh serves as a microcosm for understanding the intersection between environmental crises and political accountability. The recurring theme is that ecological degradation is not merely a symptom of climate change but also of institutional disconnection from local realities, Indigenous knowledge, and constitutional ethics. When political institutions prioritise short-term visibility over long-term resilience, they erode not only the environment but also public trust. Conversely, when accountability is reimagined as stewardship rather than surveillance, governance becomes a moral art—the art of protecting the conditions that make life possible for people. In this sense, the water crisis in Ladakh is also a crisis of imagination: a failure to envision development that honors both human aspiration and ecological balance. Reorienting this imagination requires a paradigm shift from managerial efficiency to moral efficacy. The frameworks discussed—adaptive governance, ecological modernisation, and good governance—must be infused with the philosophical insights that India's own traditions have long upheld: harmony arises from restraint, prosperity from balance, and power from responsibility. Decentralization, data transparency, and technological innovation will yield little unless guided by an ethical compass that binds the state, society, and the environment in mutual accountability. This ethical dimension is the foundation of sustainable governance.

Ultimately, the journey toward sustainable water governance in Ladakh is not only about preserving glaciers or improving pipelines; it is about reaffirming the moral architecture of the Indian democracy. A system that is accountable to its people but blind to its environment is incomplete. As Ladakh navigates the delicate passage between fragility and renewal, it offers a profound lesson for the nation: the politics of sustainability is the politics of care. To govern well in the Himalayas is to remember that governance itself, at its highest form, is an act of ecological compassion and an enduring covenant between humanity, the state, and the living Earth.

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