

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR LEGAL RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS



Open Access, Refereed Journal Multi-Disciplinary
Peer Reviewed

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FROM PROTEST TO SENSATION: MEDIA FRAMING OF SONAM WANGCHUK AND THE LADAKH AGITATION

AUTHORED BY - SHRUTI VERMA

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses media coverage of activist Sonam Wangchuk and the Ladakh protests over statehood and Sixth Schedule protection for Ladakh since Ladakh was declared a union territory in 2019. I uncover a sharp contrast of stories through content analysis of domestic and international coverage. The Indian news media mostly depict Wangchuk as an instigator who has anti-national links and sensational headlines and unsubstantiated allegations, whereas the foreign media focus on human rights issues and state oppression. The study explains how such coverage contravenes the fundamental tenets of journalism, including defamation, trial by media, flaunting of the Press Council of India rules, presuming guilt before a court decision, and using emotionally charged words to influence the masses. The study shows that sensational reporting can erode the democratic right to peaceful protest, harm personal reputations, and influence the domestic discourse and the international reputation of India by covering the hunger strike of Wangchuk, who was arrested under the National Security Act. The above results highlight the importance of ethical journalism, judicial control, and successful implementation of media laws in order to put press freedom in check with constitutional protection, especially in politically sensitive situations that touch on civil liberties and national security issues

KEYWORDS - Media framing, Ladakh protests, Sonam Wangchuk, sensationalism, press freedom, Article 19, media trials, defamation, journalistic ethics, constitutional safeguards.

INTRODUCTION-

Before 2019, Ladakh was part of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, and after the abrogation of Article 370, it became a union territory. From then on, the region faced challenges associated with its new administrative status, including requests for greater autonomy and protection of its cultural and demographic identity. Over the past few months, Ladakh has been witnessing unrest centred on the demand for statehood and constitutional protection under the Sixth

Schedule and protection of tribal rights. Sonam Wangchuk is leading a mass protest and a Hunger strike.

The demands are to make Ladakh a fully-fledged state so that it can take its own decisions and enjoy political autonomy, while safeguarding its linguistic, cultural, and land rights under Schedule 6. Calling for reservations for the youth of Ladakh and the creation of a separate parliamentary constituency.¹

Media coverage of the Ladakh protest and Sonam Wangchuk's leadership is highly sensitized by the news media houses by linking Sonam Wangchuk's protest to anti-national activities and his links to Pakistan. The domestic and international media coverage of the protest is significantly different, the narrative, the tone, everything. While the domestic media is showing this protest as political manipulation and Sonam Wangchuk as 'instigator', anti-national, and making allegations, while the international media is showing what the demands of the people are and showing him as a peaceful activist and environmentalist unfairly targeted by the authorities.

The media should function responsibly and diligently on this topic by providing accurate news, the voice of the people of Ladakh. The media acts as a pillar of democracy; it should cover the protest as a democratic expression of the people rather than sensationalizing it as a security threat. Without fact-checking, the media should spread the news, as it is a very sensitive topic. The public has the right to know what is actually happening and the rights people are fighting for. The balance between freedom of expression, state security, citizens' right to information, and ethical journalism must be there.

How the media addresses the scenario and creates a narrative widely affects the Indian audience, frames public perception, influences responses, and impacts the protestors and people fighting for those rights. The media is a very important factor in shaping societal opinion and can alter perceptions of it. In sensitive topics like this, the media has a duty to provide accurate information and not act in bias towards any party. The paper will analyse the current situation in Ladakh, the demands being made, and how the media is covering it, specifically in relation to activist Sonam Wangchuk. How the media is sensitizing and whether it is covering

¹ Abhishek Dey, *India imposes curfew in Ladakh after statehood protests turn violent*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cr5qzp7mq7qo>, last accessed on- 28 september,2025

the actual problem happening in Ladakh.

This case demonstrates how media coverage shapes public opinion, political responses, and even protests. The arrest of activist Sonam Wangchuk under the National Security Act has now become a topic of debate among news media houses, though they are also providing timely news and the voices of the people. Some parts need to be scrutinised and analysed, as the case involves the people of our country and is of national interest.

CONSTITUTIONAL AND OTHER PROVISIONS -

The right of the press is not a separate constitutional provision but has derived from freedom of speech and expression under Article 19(1) (a) of the Indian Constitution. The media or the press in India is free to publish, broadcast, and circulate, subject to constitutional limitations. Article 19(2) of the Indian Constitution imposes reasonable restrictions and provides grounds for the State to impose sensible limits on fundamental rights. These include considerations such as the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the State, the maintenance of friendly relations with foreign States, and safeguarding public order.

GROUND OF RESTRICTION-

- ❖ **Sovereignty and integrity of India** – Any speech or expression that threatens the sovereignty and integrity of India can be restricted. This includes incitement to secession or any act that harms India's unity.
- ❖ **Security of state-** any speech or expression that endangers the security of the state, such as rebellion, incitement against the government, can be restricted.
- ❖ **Friendly Relation with Foreign State** - speech or expression that harms India's relation with a foreign state or favourable connection with other states, reasonable limits can be put.
- ❖ **Public order-** speech or expression likely to disturb public order, peace or tends to do so can be restricted.
- ❖ **Decency or morality-** Anything that is obscene or against morality can be restricted.
- ❖ **Contempt of court-** speech or writing that scandalizes or lowers the authority of courts or interferes with judicial process can be restricted to hold the courts dignity.
- ❖ **Defamation-** a statement that damages a person's reputation can be restricted.
- ❖ **Incitement to offence-** Speech that encourages others to commit crimes or unlawful acts can be curtailed.

- CONTENT OF COURT ACT 1971- Media reporting that prejudices, interferes with, or obstructs the course of justice may be held in contempt of court. The Supreme Court has held that trial by media is contempt as it interferes with judicial proceedings.²
- PRESS COUNCIL OF INDIA - It is a quasi-judicial body that monitors the press and censures the media outlets that breach ethics. They have issued various advisories cautioning the media against sensationalism, particularly regarding ongoing trials and cases.³
- SECTION 69 A OF INFORMATION ACT 2000- Government of India issues necessary orders to block websites, social media handles, and posts in the interest of sovereignty and integrity of India, defence of India, security of the state, and Public order.⁴

PROTEST IN LADAKH – A TIMELINE

- HUNGER STRIKE-- Activist Sonam Wangchuk began a hunger strike on September 10, demanding the sixth schedule and statehood for Ladakh. The hunger strike saw the deaths of two activists, which angered the protesters over the delay in their responses⁵.



- SONAM WANGCHUK STATEMENT- The Ministry of Home Affairs addresses the issue and points fingers at climate activist Sonam Wangchuk for violence. The MHA held him

² S. Thejaas, *A study on criminal Trials and Media Sensationalism in India*, vol6, issue 6, International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews.

³ S. Thejaas, *A study on criminal Trials and Media Sensationalism in India*, vol6, issue 6, International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

⁴ Ministry of Information and Broadcasting .30 july, PIB Delhi

⁵ 'What led to Gen Z protest in Ladakh? All you need to know' Deccan Herald (Bengaluru, 25 September 2025) <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/ladakh/explained-what-led-to-gen-z-protest-in-ladakh-all-you-need-to-know-3742575#3>.

responsible for allegedly misleading people through ‘proactive mention’ of the Arab Spring-style protest and “references to Gen Z protests in Nepal”. The Ministry stated that it was following Wangchuk's speeches that a mob attacked a political party office as well as the government.⁶

- CURFEW IN LADAKH - Indian security forces have imposed a curfew in Leh, the capital of the Himalayan region of Ladakh, after at least four people were killed in violent clashes between police and protesters demanding statehood for the federal territory.⁷ The administration imposed prohibitory orders under Section 163 of the BNSS to ban the assembly of five or more people.
- END OF HUNGER STRIKE BY SONAM WANGCHUK- Sonam Wangchuk ended his fifteen-day hunger strike as the protest turned violent. "I request the youth of Ladakh to stop the violence forthwith, as it only causes harm to our cause and further deteriorates the situation. We do not want instability in Ladakh and the country," Wangchuk told his supporters.⁸
- ARREST OF ACTIVIST SONAM WANGCHUK- He was arrested on September 26 under the NSA by the Indian police and detained in Jodhpur jail. Stating his links to Pakistan and indulgence in anti-national activities, said the DGP.

CONTENT ANALYSIS-



News headlines and debates portraying Sonam Wangchuk as a ‘villain’, anti-national, show a highly problematic pattern of media reporting. The Sonam Wangchuk case on the Ladakh issue deeply intersects multiple media law challenges, including sensationalism, defamation, unethical reporting, and

⁶ 'What led to Gen Z protest in Ladakh? All you need to know' Deccan Herald (Bengaluru, 25 September 2025) <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/ladakh/explained-what-led-to-gen-z-protest-in-ladakh-all-you-need-to-know-3742575#3>

⁷ Abhishek Dey , *India imposes curfew in Ladakh after statehood protests turn violent*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cr5qzp7mq7qo>, last accessed on- 28 september,2025

⁸ *Sonam Wangchuk ends hunger strike as Ladakh statehood protest turn violent*, Economic Times (24 September 2025) <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/sonam-wangchuk-ends-hunger-strike-as-ladakh-statehood-protest-turns-violent/articleshow/124090857.cms?from=mdr>

media trials. Sensationalism in media means the use of shocking headlines, exaggerated reporting, and dramatizing the events to gain TRP or public attention, ignoring fair presentation.

Headlines as above stated, such as **“3 idiots ka hero nikla villain and “Wangchuk, an engineer& innovator,” started Leh violence?** Practice typical of sensationalism. The media portrayed a bigger role of Wangchuk in violence exaggerating facts and concentrating on creating a movie that would capture the emotional appeal of the audience and not inform them. The fact that, over and over again, the name of Sonam Wangchuk is publicly linked to violence, anti-nationalism, or conspiracy (without proven evidence) in the national media amounts to defamation. These were allegations that were leveled prior to a court determining any criminal culpability thus inflicting physical damages to the reputation and status of Wangchuk as an innovator and activist. The fact that, over and over again, the name of Sonam Wangchuk is publicly linked to violence, anti-nationalism, or conspiracy (without proven evidence) in the national media amounts to defamation. Such allegations were done prior to courts being able to determine any criminal liability, which would result in a real damage to the reputation of Wangchuk. Reporting in media did not present an impartial picture or put the protests of Wangchuk in perspective and instead the unproven accusations were given a lot of attention. The clickbait headlines and selective footage use and the speculative statements of the media violated the ethical responsibility of the media to inform and not to influence and to assume innocence.



Rahul Sinha on Zee News claimed that Sonam Wangchuk deliberately invoked a protest like the one in Nepal. **“Sonam Wangchuk par seedha aarop hai ki woh Nepal Ke Gen Z aandolan ki tarah Leh mein hinsa bhadkaana chahte the. Saath hi kaha gaya ki woh Leh mein Arab Spring style se pradarshan bhadkaana chahte the.** With all that dramatic, hype-y wording, which is supposed to make people feel something rather than just telling them what is

happening, the piece lures readers in with topics such as the Gen-Z movement in Nepal and the Arab Spring. It is simply too wild to make Ladakh protests look like some exotic, foreign-inspired revolution, when in the real sense, it is rather a peaceful democracy and actual

environmental concerns. The adrenaline-pumping effect of that only increases the anxiety and distracts attention from the constitutional and ecological arguments that actually matter. And placing the entire blame on Wangchuk and declaring these protests criminal acts is tantamount to the media becoming a judge and jury. That is gigantic since it distorts the entire fair-trial process that we are supposed to receive under Article 21- how the perceived image of the accused can be all distorted by news anchors and headline reporters. Even the actual decision makers could be influenced by pre-trial opinions on the street, which is a killing of due process and justice. According to the Press Council of India Code, reporters must be truthful, impartial, and not clog the airwaves with unproven statements. These headlines completely abandon that level-headed, fact-based coverage- there is speculation stacked on trivia and it is made into a national menace. All that is simply not right in journalism, and more so in our case, the next-gen journalists, to push back and make it real.



“Woh aksar bhookh hartaal par baithkar apne aap ko ek Gandhivaadi sabit karne ki koshish karte hain. Lekin is sabke peeche, woh Ladakh ke yuvaon mein asantosh paida karke unke man mein krodh ke beej daal kar sarkar ke khilaf vidroh karna chahte hain.” Suggesting that his real intent is to provoke government revolt, the content casts aspersions on his character and activism. Such baseless and public allegations, made without judicial substantiation, are

actionable defamation under Section 356 BNS, as they can lower his reputation in the eyes of the public.

Instead of presenting verifiable facts, the rhetoric frames Wangchuk's activism as a sinister conspiracy. The focus is not on what Wangchuk openly says or does, but on speculative “hidden motives” that sensationalize and escalate the seriousness of the protest.

The narrative assumes that Wangchuk is guilty of a calculated plot against the government, without any judicial investigation or findings. This presumes criminal intent and guilt—a hallmark of “trial by media”—potentially prejudicing both the public and the authorities. The Press Council of India’s guidelines and global ethical codes demand neutrality, fairness, and the avoidance of unverified allegations and sensational statements.

Headlines use provocative phrasing and emotionally-charged questions, amplifying suspicion? (*“Nepal connection,” “Gen Z agitation,” “responsible for violence”*). This kind of reporting doesn't encourage people to think critically or discuss the issues properly—it just stirs up drama and emotion.

Look at what happened when news channels kept questioning Sonam Wangchuk's motives, constantly painting him as some kind of conspirator or the mastermind behind all the violence. At that point, it wasn't journalism anymore—it became a full-blown media trial. The courts and investigative agencies are supposed to determine guilt or innocence, but the media essentially took over that role, playing both detective and judge. And here's the problem: this sort of coverage shapes what people think. Viewers start believing someone is guilty just because they've heard it repeated enough times on TV, even though there's been no proper investigation or court verdict.

What gets lost in all this is the fundamental right to protest peacefully. When the media brands genuine protesters as troublemakers or anti-national elements, it chips away at democratic freedoms. We have a basic legal principle in this country—innocent until proven guilty. But media trials completely ignore that. They've already decided the verdict and broadcasted it to millions before the accused even gets a fair hearing.



Rather than examining the legal aspects or human rights concerns surrounding Wangchuk's arrest, the whole conversation devolved into political mudslinging. Opposition parties accused the government of arresting him purely as a distraction from other issues. Political figures like Arvind Kejriwal didn't help matters—they used loaded, dramatic language, comparing the situation to Raavan, essentially casting the authorities as villains in an epic battle between good

and evil.

These kinds of comparisons—the Raavan analogy, calling it a "diversion tactic"—are textbook sensationalism. They're designed to provoke emotional reactions, not thoughtful discussion. When you invoke imagery of mythological evil, you're not inviting people to think rationally about what's happening. You're stoking anger and outrage. The media lapped this up, of course. Headlines focused on the drama and controversy instead of actually analyzing the situation or examining the protesters' original demands or the legal procedures involved.

Both politicians and news organizations ended up politicizing the entire issue, each pushing their own agenda and narrative. In the chaos, the real democratic concerns—the actual grievances of Ladakh's people, the validity of their demands, the legal propriety of the arrest—all got buried. What should have been responsible coverage of a serious issue became just another political spectacle, with everyone more interested in scoring points than addressing the substance of what was happening.

- ❖ **FOREIGN MEDIA COVERAGE** -The foreign media, including outlets like France24 and Al Jazeera, portrays the Ladakh protests through a lens that emphasizes conflict, unrest, and government repression. The framing often highlights the protests as a reaction to alleged broken promises by the Modi government, which scrapped Ladakh's semi-autonomous status in 2019 without granting the demanded constitutional safeguards or statehood.



The language used—terms like “bloodiest day,” “*crackdown*,” “*detentions*,” and “*alienating a vital community*”—amplifies the seriousness and urgency of the situation, appealing to international readers interested in human rights, regional conflict, and political dissent. This framing can evoke emotional responses and paint the Indian government, particularly Modi's

administration, in an accusatory or negative light.

International media outlets like France24 and Al Jazeera have covered the Ladakh protests quite differently from Indian news channels. Their reporting tends to focus heavily on conflict, unrest, and what they frame as government repression. They've largely presented the protests as a direct response to broken promises—specifically, that the Modi government stripped away Ladakh's semi-autonomous status back in 2019 but hasn't delivered on the constitutional protections or statehood that people there have been demanding.

The language these outlets use is pretty striking. Words like "bloodiest day," "crackdown," "detentions," and phrases about "alienating a vital community" really drive home how serious and urgent they see the situation. This kind of vocabulary naturally appeals to international audiences who follow human rights issues, regional conflicts, and political dissent. But it also tends to paint the Indian government—and Modi's administration specifically—in a rather negative, even accusatory light.

There's a lot of focus on the violence—the killings, the clashes between protesters and security forces. Yes, these things happened and deserve to be reported. But when that's almost all the coverage emphasizes, it creates this very dramatic, crisis-focused narrative. What gets left out is the broader political and historical context. The portrayal often makes Modi's government look rigid and authoritarian, but there's rarely much discussion about the security concerns India faces, the geopolitical tensions with China along that border, or

CONCLUSION

The Ladakh protests and Sonam Wangchuk's involvement demonstrate just how influential media can be in shaping what the public thinks, while also revealing the constant tension between allowing press freedom and maintaining constitutional protections. Yes, Article 19(1)(a) of our Constitution guarantees the media's right to report freely. But this freedom isn't absolute—it comes with the obligation to report fairly and accurately, particularly when dealing with politically charged issues that directly affect people's fundamental rights.

What we witnessed in the coverage of Wangchuk and these protests was far from balanced journalism. News outlets ran sensational headlines and made serious allegations without proper verification, branding him as anti-national well before any court could examine the evidence. Such reporting does real damage—not just to an individual's reputation, but to the very idea that citizens can protest peacefully in a democracy. Instead of fostering informed public

discourse, the media became a vehicle for prejudice and mob justice.

There are legal mechanisms designed to curb such irresponsible journalism. The Press Council of India has issued guidelines, there's the Contempt of Court Act, and we have provisions in the Information Technology Act as well. However, effectively enforcing these rules has proven difficult. Meanwhile, Wangchuk's detention under the National Security Act raises a whole new set of concerns—how do we safeguard civil liberties without compromising national security? This situation underscores why we desperately need strong judicial oversight that can prevent these laws from being weaponized against legitimate democratic dissent.

Adding another layer of complexity is the stark contrast between how the Indian and international media reported these events. Domestic channels predominantly adopted a national security angle, portraying the protests as potential threats. Foreign news organizations, however, focused heavily on human rights violations and state repression. This divergence matters because media narratives don't just shape domestic opinion—they also determine how India is perceived on the global stage.

Ultimately, what the Ladakh case tells us is that the media must uphold its democratic responsibility by remaining truthful, fair, and committed to protecting human rights. When journalism prioritizes sensationalism over substance, or allows bias to creep into reporting, it doesn't just lose credibility—it actively undermines individual rights and democratic processes. We need journalism that takes its ethical responsibilities seriously, backed by robust legal frameworks and vigilant judicial oversight. Only then can we hope to maintain a democracy that genuinely protects both its citizens and the national interest.