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SECMOL: The Movement  
Success Story and Victimization

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*Mein Akeyla hi chala tha janib-e-manzil magar  
Log saath aatee Gaye, Caravan banta gaya*  
— Majrooh Sultan

A movement which was aimed at rebuilding the lost pride and self-esteem of the Ladakhi people through education has been facing a tough time in dealing with circumstances which have forced the man behind this movement, Sonam Wangchuk, to go places in search of support for his dignified cause. Dubbed as an antinational, a land grabber and above all a nuisance in the smooth functioning of the education department in Leh and Ladakh, an allegedly arrogant bureaucrat has almost forced Wangchuk to quit his work.

Although, Wangchuk is a contented man for the fact that he is aware of what he has done for Ladakh but it is the victimization of other NGO that has motivated him to fight a lone battle against the Babudom. Having reaped fruits of Wangchuk's work, politicians are now reluctant to come forward in his support. Although, unofficially they say that Wangchuk is a man of commanding determination and has all the qualities of being rated as one of the greats of 21<sup>st</sup> century but officially, they hesitate from questioning the district administration at Leh over this issue.

“We have no doubt that Wangchuk has brought reforms in Ladakhi society through his ‘Operation New Hope’, he is not an anti-national I know, he has been working with utmost integrity, I accept but unless Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council does come clear with its stand over the issue, we are unable to help him,” said a senior Ladakhi bureaucrat requesting anonymity. Similar is the answer of other Ladakhi bureaucrats and ministers in the present coalition.

But the man, who has been fighting against the corrupt and inefficient system for the past 19 years, has not lost hope. “I cannot say why they are reluctant but it is highly unfortunate for the people of Leh that their representatives are silent over this crisis, when they were holding positions in LAHDC at Leh. Activities of SECMOL were not suspicious but now suddenly, SECMOL has been kept under surveillance,” said the Director of SECMOL. He stressed that Ladakhi ministers and bureaucrats need to awaken their conscience which has gone into slumber due to political compulsions or due to bureaucratic acquaintance.

### **Origin of SECMOL**

Founded in the year 1988 by a group of students who had themselves been ‘victims’ of the alien education system foisted on Ladakh and its people, Students’ Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh (SECMOL) worked to rebuild the lost

pride and self-possession of the Ladakhi people through its educational reforms Programme 'Operation New Hope'. The movement knew where to strike and how. They strove to rebuild the corrupt, inefficient and highly irresponsible system of education.

### **The strategy**

SECMOL adopted a three-tiered localization strategy to bring about educational reforms. They created Village Education Committees (VEC), provided special teacher training and introduced language and cultural reforms with a hope to build an educational model to rove government schools in Ladakh.

Beginning with one school in the village of Saspol, SECMOL started by engaging the villagers themselves in the school system. They realized early in his work that change at the policy level lay in people's support and participation. Mitigating the dangerous political situation in which they were working in, the people also acted as a protective shield against the wrath of the government.

Building on that foundation, SECMOL took the initiative of launching the Village Education Committees (VEC). The villages that want teacher training were asked to pay for it. Each villager contributed a little towards the total amount. This contribution ensured the villagers' enthusiasm in the process of change and hence secured their future role as monitors of the schools.

SECMOL worked with the committees and with new teachers to introduce a localized curriculum with local ornamentation and perspective. SECMOL took special care in avoiding and neutralizing conflict by maintaining a balance between teachers and people. Rural folk would take great care of teachers coming to teach their children. Villagers were encouraged to organize welcome and farewell parties for the teachers.

According to SECMOL's strategy, the training of teachers lays special stress on various flaws in the prevailing education system, namely. A team of SECMOL got introduced relevant topics in the curriculum and through its advocacy efforts, government introduced English at the primary level in 1992.

In 1996, Hill Council adopted SECMOL's "Operation New Hope" as its official policy for the government schools of Ladakh. SECMOL further strengthened the voice of the people by merging Village Education Councils into Block Education Committees and these further into District Education Committees with an aim to strengthen citizens' movement to keep an eye on the functioning of schools.

SECMOL's work achieved first success with the building of a central government residential school at Durbuk village. Everyone in the community put in at least one day's labour to build the school. Because the buildings were insulated for winter use, they were able to implement a path-breaking change in the educational cycles.

While children in Durbuk used to spend their school break in idleness during cold winters, now they spend their break outdoors during the summer, often helping their parents at work farming, and study through the winter.

SECMOL has incorporated the use of solar energy at the hostel in Phey and has also set up a learning center for students to learn about solar energy. SECMOL has installed a solar cooker and solar pump to feed and wash the 200 students who live in the hostel. Solar power lights the hostel at night.

Due to a result of citizens' advocacy, the government has changed the official language of instruction in Ladakhi schools from Hindi to English, the second language of

the people in the region (Boddhi is the first). Meanwhile, by publishing and distributing the first Ladakhi magazines and teaching materials, SECMOL is playing a significant role in establishing a modern written Ladakhi language.

### **The man who led the movement against all odds: Sonam Wangchuk**

The man who laid the foundation stone of this movement is Sonam Wangchuk; founder Director of the Students' Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh (SECMOL). Sonam spent the first seven years of his childhood with his mother in a remote Ladakhi village, climbing trees, helping her with housework, and learning to read and write in Ladakhi.

Wangchuk feels that the opportunity to learn Ladakhi was one of the best things, since the schools he attended did not teach the language. His father, Sonam Wangyal, a politician who later became a minister in the state government, was stationed in Srinagar.

There, Sonam Wangchuk looked different from the other students and was addressed in a language he did not understand.

Many adults regarded his lack of responsiveness as stupidity. Unable to bear the treatment, he escaped to a Delhi school he heard of, pleaded his case to the principal, and got himself admitted. It was free, residential, government-run school for children from the border areas of India. The encouragement of the teachers in the school brought him out of his shell; he studied, participated in extracurricular activities, and blossomed into a confident young boy.

Sonam later opted to go to Ladakh where he opened a tuition center to help students take their first board exam (Class 10). The response was overwhelming. He tried new teaching methods in his class and encouraged peer learning. The experience led Sonam to realize that the core difficulty was with the language.

In 1988, a year after graduating as an engineer, Sonam with his brother and five peers, formed the Students' Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh (SECMOL). Their first fundraising effort, a Ladakhi cultural show, proved to be a huge success. Until 1990 Sonam coached school students and offered vocational training courses to dropouts. Sonam had to get to the root of the problem, and the solution to that lay in localizing the system of elementary education.

In 1991 Sonam started his first intervention in the government school of Saspol with permission from the chief education officer of the region. The success of the model created popular demand for his training, and 33 villages came forward to adopt the model before the newly formed Hill Council adopted it as official policy.

In 1995, when Ladakh was placed under governor's rule for political disturbance, Sonam and his team went to plead their case with the special advisor to the governor. Impressed by their efforts, the advisor ordered the state government of Jammu and Kashmir to support the Melong publications, and thus Sonam went on to publish his first set of books in Ladakhi.

### **The controversy**

It all started when Wangchuk made a speech in a conference at Leh and said something about Deputy Commissioner M.K. Diwedi which irked him. On the very next day after this incident, Deputy Commissioner sent a notice to the NGO's seeking an

explanation regarding the funds being utilized by them. Further, in the due course of time, he blacklisted some of the NGOs while issuing prohibitory instructions to others

NGOs got united over this alleged action of the deputy commissioner. They collectively started a resentment movement against the deputy commissioner which was spearheaded by Director of SECMOL Sonam Wangchuk. This allegedly irked the district administration which resulted into a series of allegations and counter-allegations being leveled against each other.

**Following is the diary of events that have taken place in Ladakh during the last 19 years of existence of SECMOL**

**1988:** SECMOL comes into being.

**December 23, 2001:** Director of SECMOL Sonam Wangchuk appears on the cover of the India's reputed and largest selling magazine "The Week". The magazine makes him "Man of the Year-2001" for his revolutionary activities.

**June 25, 2001:** Director of SECMOL appears on the cover of "Outlook India", another reputed news magazine of the country.

**December 21, 2004:** Secretary to Union Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India Kumud Bansal invites Director of SECMOL Sonam Wangchuk to be on the governing council of the National Mission for the achievement of goal of universal elementary education (UEE).

**August 12, 2005:** Chairman of Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC), Kargil Haji Asgar Ali Karbalaie invites Director of SECMOL Sonam Wangchuk to help them in streamlining the education system in Kargil.

**August 15, 2005:** Chairman of Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC), Leh Rigzin Spalbar appreciates contribution of Sonam Wangchuk in drafting the vision document titled "Ladakh 2025, a roadmap for progress and prosperity".

**April 3, 2006 (Morning):** Speaking at a conference on "Youth and Employment" organized by District Industries Department at Leh, Sonam Wangchuk while saying that today's youth should go for private entrepreneurship instead of limiting themselves to government jobs made a passing remark saying that in government jobs, from a peon to chief secretary, people live off on tax payers money.

**April 3, 2006 (Evening):** Deputy Commissioner Leh M.K. Diwedi gives an angry telephone call to Sonam Wangchuk in which he criticized him for having insulted those doing government jobs during his speech. Wangchuk apologizes saying that he never wanted to offend any profession. But Deputy Commissioner expresses displeasure. (As narrated by Sonam Wangchuk).

**April 4, 2006:** An order No. DC-(NGO) 06(0704) dated 4.04.2006 was served to all the NGOs by Deputy Commissioner (DC) Leh M.K. Diwedi stating that intelligence

reports indicate violation of fiscal and administrative norms by a large number of non-governmental organizations operating in Leh. It further indicted the NGO's of misuse of funds due to lack of transparency and accountability in the maintenance of accounts.

**May 30, 2006:** A Network of Non-governmental Organizations (NGO's) of Ladakh called Ladakh Voluntary Network (LNV) in response to Deputy Commissioner's order sent a letter to him explaining their position. This letter was signed by chairman of Ladakh Voluntary Network (LNV) Padma Tashi, who runs an NGO called "Rural Development and You".

**July 25, 2006:** Deputy Commissioner in an official communication through letter no. DC-(NGO) 04(704) dated 25.07.2006 to senior superintendent of police (SSP) Leh informed him that Non-political certificate issued by his office vide file no. DML-1V-97(903) dated 30.04.1997 to NGO namely "Rural Development and You" being led by Padma Tashi has been withdrawn and the said NGO has been blacklisted.

**August 24, 2006:** Divisional Commissioner, Kashmir Basharat Ahmed Dar intervened and held deliberations with the NGOs from 22 to 24<sup>th</sup> August proposing a four point formula which involved increase in cooperation and interaction between government agencies and NGOs, periodic social audit and presentation of programmes, policies, achievements and activities before the public along with sharing the same with district administration on the formats to be decided mutually.

**January 18, 2007:** Chairman of Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC), Leh Chering Dorjay after appreciating the good work being done by SECMOL requests the organizational head Sonam Wangchuk to continue providing its expertise in the training of teachers and mobilizing Village Education Committees for the success of Ladakh Model of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan.

**February 27, 2007:** Deputy Commissioner, Leh through a notice no: DCL/NGO/06(704) dated 28.02.2007 informed Director of SECMOL Sonam Wangchuk that there are more serious allegations against him and his organization which included illegally occupation of 200 kanals of land without paying government dues apart from having anti-national connections in China and other places.

**February 27, 2007:** Another notice no: DCL/NGO/06(704) attached with this notice was sent to Director of SECMOL Sonam Wangchuk in which it had been stated that he is under illegal occupation of 200 kanals of state land at Phey and was asked to deposit a premium of Rs. 80 lakhs for the land into government treasury.

**March 1, 2007:** Director of SECMOL Sonam Wangchuk denies all the allegations and accuses Deputy Commissioner M.K. Diwedi of playing a mischievous game. Along with this letter, he prepares a CD in which he explains the alleged High Handedness of Deputy Commissioner in Ladakhi language.

**March 8, 2007:** Deputy Commissioner M.K. Diwedi through an order no. DCL/NGO/06(704) dated 08.03.2007 orders imposition of section 144 which included complete ban on circulation of materials like CD/Audio/Video cassette, written text, pamphlet, books, brochures and letters issued by Sonam Wangchuk.

**March 11, 2007:** The CD prepared by Sonam Wangchuk reaches Ladakhi bureaucrats and Ministers who according to Wangchuk always supported his organizational activities. He says that they are aware of the facts but reluctant to act due to political compulsions.