

Indian activist Wangchuk rallying Gen Z against Modi

Saurabh Sharma and Krishna N. Das
REUTERS

NEW DELHI — Indian social activist Sonam Wangchuk may be pushing 60, but he has become the face of a Gen Z movement demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's education minister over exam paper leaks, drawing wider support after he was forcibly taken to hospital following three weeks of fasting.

Wangchuk is best known for campaigning on issues affecting his Himalayan region of Ladakh, bordering China. But his fast over exam paper leaks that affected millions of students has won him a new following among young Indians, helping turn the issue into a broader Gen Z movement and piling pressure on Modi's government.

Even before police in Delhi moved him to hospital at the weekend after his hunger strike in solidarity with protesting supporters of the youth Cockroach Janta Party, some were comparing Wangchuk to India's independence hero Mahatma Gandhi. He has been getting video and text messages of support from across India, including from Bollywood actors.

"It pains me when some say you're the Gandhi of the 21st century, the modern Gandhi, you're the real hero," he said from Delhi's Jantar Mantar protest site.

"I am no Gandhi, no hero. I'm just an ordinary citizen who has not shied away from his responsibilities. Don't look for a hero in others. Be the hero of your own life and fulfill your responsibilities."

Lovingly called "Sonam Sir" — Sonam means "merit" or "virtue" in some cultures — by many, including CJP founder Abhijeet Dipke, Wangchuk is one of Ladakh's most prominent public figures, having built a career around education reform and water-conservation projects in the desert.

In 2018, he was awarded the Ramon Magsaysay Award, widely known as Asia's Nobel Prize, for those efforts. Born in 1966 in the small, remote village of Ulaytokpo in Ladakh, he was a 19-year-old engineering student at the government-run National Institute of Technology in Kashmir when he ran a coaching program in basic subjects such as English and mathematics that helped hundreds of students. He later set up the Students' Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh.

As climate change affected water



People move barricades from a protest site ahead of a planned march toward parliament by supporters of India's Cockroach Janta Party, demanding the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan over exam paper leaks, near Jantar Mantar, New Delhi, India, on July 20.

ANUSHREE FADNAVIS/REUTERS



Abhijeet Dipke, head of the Cockroach Janta Party, holds the hand of Sonam Wangchuk, an Indian education reformer, who has been on hunger strike, as he rests onstage before being taken to the hospital by the authorities during a sit-in protest demanding the resignation of Indian Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi, India, on July 18.

BHAWIKA CHHABRA/REUTERS FILE

supplies, Wangchuk built artificial glaciers in the form of "ice stupas," conically shaped ice mountains that store water in winter and melt in summer to supply irrigation water, his Magsaysay citation says.

In recent years, he has become a

leading advocate for environmental protection and greater autonomy for Ladakh, a federally controlled territory. He was jailed for nearly six months in 2025 after deadly protests demanding statehood for the region. Wangchuk denied instigating the violence.

Indian media reported that his father, Sonam Wangyal, was a minister in the former state of Jammu and Kashmir, and that former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi helped break one of his hunger strikes over demands for affirmative action for Ladakh residents.

Wangchuk is married to Gitanjali J. Angmo, who also works in education, and has previously said he was prepared to die for his causes, including demanding the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan. Pradhan has not responded to multiple emails from Reuters seeking comment.

Wangchuk earlier said his fast could last six weeks unless he died first: "But hopefully we don't have to go that far. A sensitive government in a democracy listens to the pain of its people, and I hope they will take action."

"Our demand for a resignation will bring some accountability to the system," Wangchuk told Reuters days before Delhi Police swooped in to move him to hospital.

"At least, this will help restore trust in democracy."