

Kargil: The Post-War Scenario

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Kargil district is one of the eight districts situated in the Kashmir region of the State of Jammu and Kashmir and it along with the Leh district, is referred to as Ladakh division, though administratively, it is included in the Kashmir division. It is bordered in the north by Gilgit district (PO) and in the east by Leh district. In the west and south-west it is contiguous with Baramullah, Srinagar, Anantnag and Doda districts.

Kargil is named after its district headquarter, Kargil. Etymologically, the word 'Kargil' is derived from two words: "Karo" (meaning, 'where') and "Gyl" (meaning to fall). According to folklores, it is said that in earlier times some nobles shot arrows in different directions and one of the arrows fell at the present Kargil town and the people said about the place 'where the arrows fell (Kargil)'. Thus was Kargil named after the falling arrows!

Kargil lies between 32.95 degree and 34.75 degree northern latitude and between 75.33 degree and 77.58 degrees eastern longitude. The average altitude of most of the villages of the district is 10,000 ft. above the sea level. The total area of the district is 14.036 sq.kms[1].

Kargil along with whole of Ladakh, is dry rocky place with xerophytic vegetation. Its terrain as well as its topography is rocky. It receives a very small percentage of rainfall, and rain and snow together do not exceed 37.5 cms per year. Hence snow is the only source of water which drains down through the gorges in high mountain valleys. Hence the plantation and inhabitation is possible only in those areas, where water flows. The cultivable area in the district is about 10,000 hectares, as against 19,437 hectares of reported land. The population of the district was 91,670 in 1995[2].

The Kargil district is administratively divided into two tehsils, viz. Kargil and Zanskar. However, on the basis of ethnic composition, Kargil can be divided into three regions. Firstly, the Drass region, which is inhabited mostly by the Dards (Brokpas) high land dwellers as they are referred to by the Ladakhis). Secondly, there is the Purik region, which is inhabited by the Purikpas and thirdly, there is the Zanskar, which is mostly inhabited by the Botas and Muslims of Kashmir origin.

According to the census of 1981 there were 104 villages in the Kargil Tehsil, which includes two uninhabited villages as well[3]. Out of these, there were 14 villages inhabited by the Dards and some of these have mixed population of Dards and Purikpas. At present, it has been found that there are 29 villages in the Drass belt, which are inhabited by Dards and some by Purikpas as well.

Linguistically the region is intermingled with two main language groups, Dard and Bhotia. In the Dard group comes the language of the Dards of Drass, who speak Shina dialect of Dard language and a few villages in the North of Kargil, where people speak another dialect called Brokpa. The people in the Purik region of Kargil speak Purik language, which is a dialect of the Tibetan language group and belongs to Tibeto-Himalayan branch of Tibeto-Burman languages and is allied to Ladakhi and Bhati[4].

The Purik language is being spoken by about 78 percent population of Kargil while 10 percent speak Dard group of languages and about 3 per cent speak Balti language. Balti is a dialect of Tibetan and is spoken by the inhabitants of Askardu (Baltistan) and Turtuk in the Nubra valley of Leh district. The Buddhists of Zaskar speak Bhotia or Ladakhi language. The Kashmiri language is also spoken by about 50 per cent of the inhabitants of the village Malayan, which lies near the entrance to Kargil district, after crossing the Zojila pass. However, in Drass, we find most of the people there speaking three languages, firstly Purik and Shina, which are the regional languages and then Kashmiri.

Drass is the coldest inhabited place of the Ladakh region and is said to be the second coldest place after Siberia. During winter, temperature drops below – 40 degrees Celsius. It is unapproachable during winter and remains cut off from the Kashmir valley as well as other parts of the Kargil district. The tough climatic and topographic conditions make the place almost uninhabitable.

The region is primarily inhabited by agricultural communities. The economic activities of the people are confined to farming and cattle rearing. The crops grown in the region vary in different parts. Drass is the coldest region of the district and one finds people growing millet, pinga (cereal) and trumbe (cereal) and even some wheat there. A variety of Grass known as alpha is also raised here for fodder. The people of the Kargil town and its surrounding villages upto Mulbekh (52 Kms from Kargil) raise two crops. The first crop is the main crop and the second one is generally for fodder purposes. The fruits like apricot, is found in abundance in some villages adjoining the Kargil town such as Hardas, Hunderman, Karkitchu, Chani-guand and in Chulicahn, Shaker Chikkan, Batalik and Silmon villages. However, the same is not found in Drass region and if it is found at all in any village, that is of inferior quality.

As a result of the recent development and modernization, the people of the region have been able to get government jobs and many of them are into small-time trade. At present there is a sufficient number of local physicians (doctors) engineers and other professionals in the district as well. It is reported that all the doctors in the districts are locals.

Similarly, a large number of local engineers are also working there. A good number of local teachers are available too at the matriculation level; however, for higher education above matric, rarely any local teacher is available. It is due to the fact that in the recent past majority of the students from the district who went for higher studies preferred more lucrative jobs to education.

As a result of the change in the occupational structure and mainly with the opening of the region, in seventies, to foreign tourists, the whole region of Ladakh witnessed tremendous change so far as availability of economic opportunities was concerned. Prior to the opening of the region to foreign tourists, there was not a single hotel in the Kargil town and the passengers travelling between

Srinagar and Leh were supposed to spend the night inside the vehicles they were travelling in. There were only a few ordinary restaurants serving cheap-quality foods for which non-Ladakhis had barely any taste. The town gave a hazy look where petty shopkeepers, road side vendors and hawkers were in abundance. However, due to influx of tourists into Ladakh via Kashmir, Kargil became an important halting place. For the tourists visiting Zanaskar (famous historical place with Buddhist monuments) Kargil also serves as a base camp. As a result, the town extended and acquired a modern look and gradually, a large number of hotels and restaurants with modern facilities came up. Later, when Kargil was carved out as new district in 1979, the town became a district headquarter and developmental activities increased throughout the district of Kargil. However, with the advent of militancy in the Kashmir valley in 1989-90, the tourism industry in Kargil town suffered heavily, as the movement of the tourists to Ladakh via Kashmir came to a stand still. However, many people from Kashmir set up their business in Kargil because of the declining economic conditions in the valley due to militancy. Even a number of ex-militants, surrendered militants, emigrants settled in Kargil and other parts of Ladakh. So Kargil became a sanctuary for the politically and economically displaced people.

Cross-Border Shelling

From 1992 onwards the village of Hunderman near the town of Kargil faced cross border shelling, as was reported by the inhabitants of Hunderman [5] village. The Pak forces warned them several times about the danger of cross border shelling and asked them to leave the place or fend for themselves. By 1993, the vehicles travelling from Srinagar to Kargil were stopped by the security forces for hours together in the morning to prevent any damage due to cross-border shelling. However, these were minor incidents and the people did not take any serious note of it.

In the year 1997, a major incident was reported when the Pak forces shelled the main township of Kargil damaging some houses, a mosque and a hospital and killed and injured several civilians, which included locals and non-local (Kashmiri) shopkeepers. This incident was severely criticized by the people. Many versions of the event started pouring in later. One of them, which was most popular was that the locals being mostly Shi'ite, described it as the activity of the Wahabi elements in the Pak forces, who are supposed to be hostile towards the Shi'ites. Even if such a hypothesis could not be authenticated by any factual evidence, it created a sense of fear psychosis in the minds of the local populace. All this has affected their lives in considerable ways.

The region has been witnessing constant shelling since then. Particularly the areas between Kharbu (18 kms from Kargil on highway, towards Srinagar) and Kargil town has become prone to the cross-border shelling. This zone is considered dangerous and during night hours the drivers are supposed to switch off the light of the vehicles to avoid being targeted by the Pakistani shellers. The terror continued in 1998 as well.

In the summer of 1999 when the people were expecting the opening of Srinagar-Kargil national highway a bit earlier due to dry winter, the incident on 15th May 1999 came as a great surprise.

As reported by locals of Drass they were as usual busy in their day to day chores when a sudden explosion was heard followed by a steady shower of shells from the north-west (Tiger Hill). As per the account of the locals, this was a novel phenomenon in the region for there had never been this

sort of continuous shelling of such intensity, after the 1947 Indo-Pak conflict. Hence the people started running helter-skelter and began to leave their villages. It being an extra-ordinary emergency situation, people left their houses and began to run away towards safer places. It was quite impossible to carry their belongings etc. to safer places. So they rushed towards Kargil and Kashmir, leaving their belongings, animals etc unmoved. In Kargil they were made to stay at village Minjee (8 Kms from town, and other parts of Suru valley) in the south of Kargil and some went to Chikthan side, towards the north-east of Kargil. Some inhabitants of Malayan and Pandrass village on the border line of Kashmir and Kargil districts, left for Kashmir valley and were made to stay at village Kulan, on Srinagar-Kargil highway. It had been reported by local dailies of Kashmir that some Buddhist fundamentalists did not allow the Muslims migrants from Drass to enter the Leh district.

Now we will discuss the impact of this recent upheaval on the Socio-economic life of the people of the region.

Economy

As mentioned earlier the region is primarily an agricultural one and even though the yield is very limited, still it is sufficient to complement the rice and wheat (flour) provided by the government. In addition fodder for the cattle is also raised through agriculture. Due to war conditions, during farming season all the villagers were away, hence no cropping could be done. Even the fodder could not be irrigated, for the whole land and fields were under the army's occupation in and around the Drass village. Also, due to continued cross border firing in the villages adjacent the Kargil town, after the culmination of war, the position continued to be same there. Hence there was no cropping in the villages situated between Chaniguand (13 km) and Kharbu (18 km from Kargil). The locals also reported that after they returned to their villages they could not trace out their cattle, which they had left behind. They lamented about the troubles they would have to face in the ensuing winter in particular, for they can not do without milk from cows they had lost and without bullocks and donkeys for they helped them in farming. They use bullocks for ploughing and donkeys for transporting the manure.

Many people, particularly from village Mataya and Mushka reported that during their absence from their village many of their belongings were stolen away from their houses. This loss cannot be recovered by any means, as the administration is not ready to accept it as genuine reporting.

Similarly, in the areas adjoining Kargil town and in Swat valley (north-east of Kargil), which were under direct influence of war and later cross border shelling, have been affected badly. The villages like Goma Kargil, Lankor, Baroo, Kurbathang, Akchamal etc. have been facing difficulties in farming for three years and cropping had been possible this time, but harvesting has been problem for them. Because of the Kargil war and their displacement, they could not even attend to their crops and the crop-yield would be very low because of irregular irrigation, improper care etc. The situation will continue till the cross border shelling is not halted.

The migrants, as reported, were paid ration in the form of rice and kerosene during war days. After they returned to their localities all this was abruptly stopped. However, those villagers who have been under perpetual shelling from across the border have not been paid any thing. Most of them

are still out of their villages. Though the administration has decided to provide financial assistance to the inhabitants for construction of bunkers to protect the houses from shelling, the people do not consider the amount (Rs. 10,000) which the administration has decided to reimburse per house-owner, sufficient enough to construct a bunker. Reportedly, at least twelve thousand rupees are required only to dig the ground to make the bunker.

Education

The region has been educationally very much backward. As per the census of 1981 the literacy rate of the Kargil district was 18.26 per cent, the total population of the district was merely 65,000. Female literacy was just 3.5%. However, a network of schools has now been opened in the district. Rarely any village is without a school but the greatest difficulty in the smooth functioning of the schools here has been the non-availability of qualified and talented local staff. Most of the teachers, working in high and higher secondary schools and college are non-locals from other parts of the state. They are required to serve there for at least three years. They find it, in most cases, difficult to adjust themselves in the harsh climatic conditions that prevail here. Most of these employees from outside Ladakh consider their posting as a sort of imprisonment. Hence psychologically, they are not ready to serve here. It is natural that in the abnormal circumstances of the war, these people had almost suspended their activities. All this tells upon the region's educational standards. Thus, the cross border shelling ever since it started in 1997, has directly affected the operation of the educational institutions in the Kargil district. All the educational institutions in the shelling-prone areas, as has been mentioned above, used to remain closed. Some of these were shifted to safer zones. Most of the students from the local degree college migrated to Kashmir valley. During war time, school buildings in Drass were severely damaged and even up to September Schools had not re-opened. As a result of the disruption in the schooling period, the education of the students further suffered and it is not known how long they will go on suffering like this. Even if they are given mass promotion in their present class, it will also affect their educational and intellectual achievement in this age of tough competition in the educational field. People, in order to get qualitative education to their children are now interested to send their children to schools outside Ladakh. However, only a small percentage is able to do so due to economic reasons. Hence the parents who have sent their children outside have to shoulder extra financial burden and now that they are in a very bad financial state, they can ill afford to support the study of their children outside.

Political Aspirations

Being a Muslim dominated belt Kargil has to a great extent political affiliation with Kashmiri Muslims unlike the Buddhist who have been against the Kashmiri dominated politics of the State. Earlier, Ladakh Buddhist Association demanded separate administrative structure for the Ladakhis and the Hill Development Council was granted to Leh District. The people of Kargil were offered to accept the same but they categorically rejected the offer, as they were not willing to separate themselves from the direct administration of the State. However, they have not been associated with the militancy or secessionist elements of the state. Since the advent of militancy the people of valley and other Muslims of the state have, to a great extent, remained passive in the political activities, particularly, with regard to the electioneering process. In the previous elections for Lok Sabha and the State legislature Muslims were forced to boycott the voting, however, Muslims of

the region actively participated in the voting process. Kargil people have been responsible for the success of National Conference candidate from the Ladakh parliament constituency. The Muslims of the region have habitually voted for the National Conference candidates, whom they think would present their problems before government in a better way. It is because of this consideration that the two antagonistic groups of Kargil-Islamic school (led by traditional ulmas) and Khumaini Front (led by leaders under the impact of revolutionary ideas of Imam Khumaini) collectively supported the National Conference candidate in previous and recent parliament elections.

But the Kargilites have habitually stayed away from militancy and, in the aftermath of the war, they have started settling down in a cool and sequestered way and have tried to reorganise their lives in the same familiar inhospitable terrain. Despite the international hullabaloo being raised over the Kargil crisis, they would not like to discuss the politics going on all around themselves. They would rather prefer to project their local problems and seek the sympathetic attention of the administration.

References

1. Census of India, 1981.
2. District Profile, Department of Information, Srinagar, p.4.
3. Ibid.
4. Bailey, T. Grahme (1915) Linguistic Studies from the Himalayas, Reprint 1975, New Delhi, Asia Pub. Service, p.5.
5. Hunderman was in Pak occupation upto 1971 war.