



# KARGIL

**An Abode of Mountain Tamers**

**NAVREET MILTON**



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Navreet Milton



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To  
my mother  
to whom I shall forever remain indebted  
for what I am.



## Preface

During the local body elections of Kargil District in September 2008, I had an opportunity to see from very close quarters, a beautiful undiscovered civilisation where the locals were largely ignorant of the modern day world as they were oblivious of the life beyond their boundaries. Suddenly, I felt the urge to document this vast ocean of virgin uncharted territory that had gained importance only during the Indo-Pak conflicts which had thus relegated the town to war-ravaged ghostly confines only to be discussed in military war games. Albeit, many books have been written on the beauty of Kargil and the 1999 Indo-Pak war but nobody has touched the emotional aspect of this place and its people. As days went by, I felt it all the more necessary to make full use of the opportunity that had come my way and knocked at my door and I began reaching out and interacting with the locals, eminent known personalities of Kargil, Leh, Srinagar and Jammu, with foreigners as also with tourists in a quest to gather information on local traditions, customs, religious and political beliefs as also the poor state of development. These are just a few of the many issues that I have worked upon and documented.

I would not have been successful on this dream project of mine but for the support from my husband Milton and sons Stephen and Kevin. He agreed to call us over to Kargil so that while I pursued my research on Kargil, he managed to strike a balance between his office routine and looking after the children. I am also lucky to have chosen journalism as a career option and it is only because I was working as a freelancer and meeting people from different sections on a regular basis in connection with my work in the journalistic profession that I was able to weave my way through all bottlenecks and roadblocks.

I also would like to place on record my sincere gratitude and appreciation to Asgar Ali Karbalie, Ahmed Shera, Tashi Padum, Nasir Munshi, Hussain, and the District Information officer for their invaluable assistance and suggestions that have gone a long way in shaping this book in the manner that I had always dreamt of.

My special thanks to C. Viswanathan and Sreekumaran for being there for technical support without which it would have been impossible to streamline my work.

However, all this would not have been possible but for the blessings of the Almighty and that of my beloved Mother who always supported me since the day I was born to the day she left us for her heavenly abode. This book is dedicated to her enduring love.

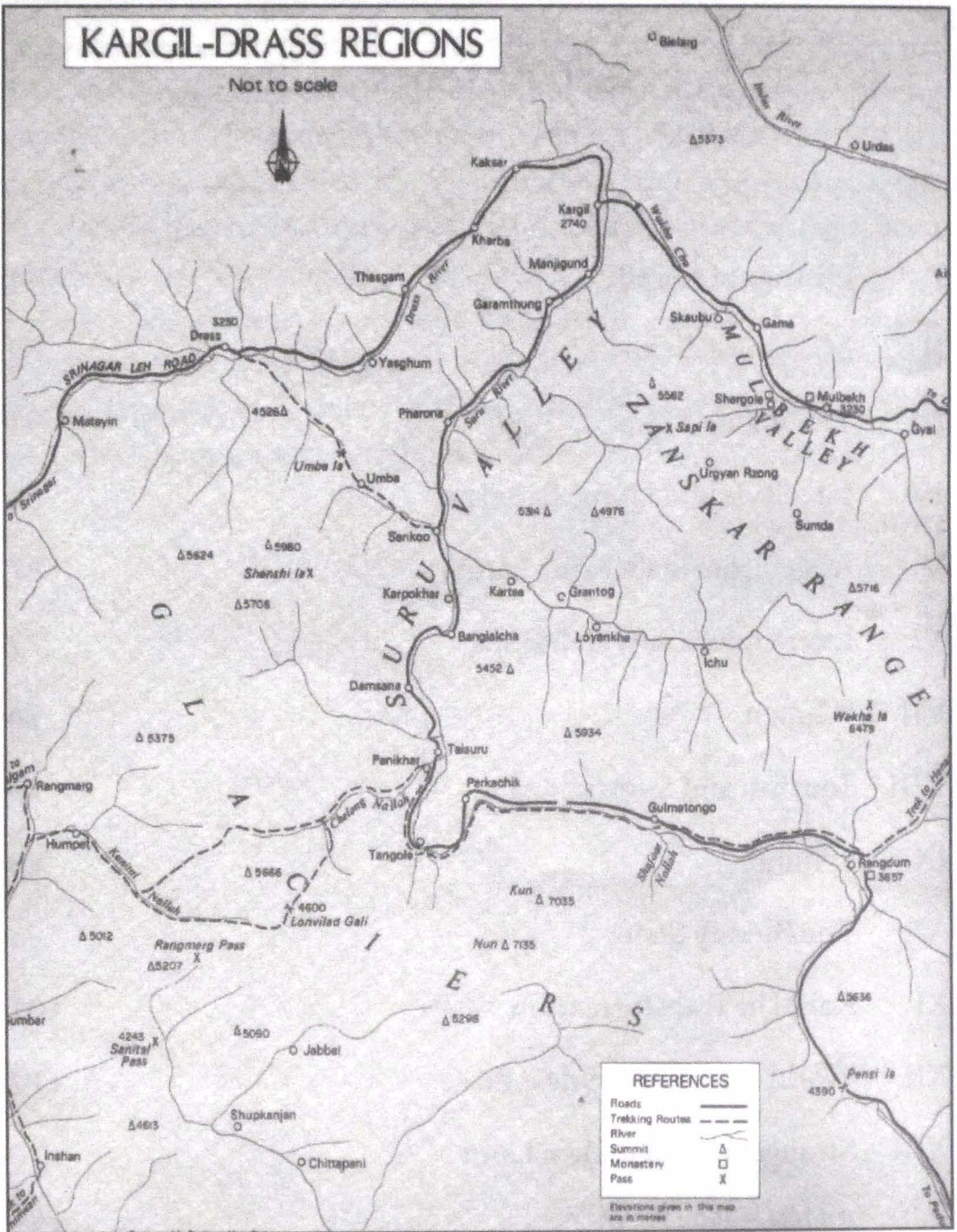
**Navreet Milton**



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# LADAKH AND ADJOINING AREAS



*This is not an exact map. It only indicates boundaries.*

## CHAPTER 1

# History of Kargil

Kargil derives its name from the words 'Khar' and 'rKil', where the former stands for the term of Castle, and 'rKil' stands for the centre. Thus, when these two words are put together, it gives the meaning of a spot that is in between two castles. The other fact is that the place is at an equal distance from Srinagar, Skardu, Leh and Padum with around 200 km. With the passage of time, Khar or rKil came to be known as Kargil.

Kargil became distinct only after the Kashmir issue in 1947, which eventually led to the Indo-Pak war. There were pitched battles fought around Kargil which saw the entire area including Drass and Zoji La Pass initially coming under Pakistan control before most of it was reclaimed by the Indian troops in November 1948. It remained with India after the ceasefire, but again saw some action in the second Kashmir war with India managing to wrest back the remainder of the Kargil area twice. The first capture was on 17 May 1965, when skirmishes broke out in the Rann of Kutch, and India retaliated in the Kashmir sector. However, this had to be returned as per UN resolution. On 15 August 1965, Kargil fell to Indian forces, though it was once again returned as part of the Tashkent Agreement.

However, in the Indo-Pak War of 1971, the entire Kargil region including key posts was captured by Indian troops. In order to straighten out the line of control in the area, the Indian Army launched night attacks when the ground temperatures sank to minus 17° Celsius and about 15 enemy posts located at a height of 16,000 feet and more were captured. After Pakistan forces lost the war and agreed to the Shimla Agreement, Kargil and other strategic

areas nearby remained with India. Kargil became a separate district in the Ladakh region in July 1979 when it was bifurcated from the Leh district.

Documented history of Kargil is not existing but Late Moulvi Hasmat Ullah Khan and Late Kachu Sikandar Khan, a 20th century scholar, had compiled some references of what they heard from their ancestors and also some information they gathered from Tibetan chronicles. Many of the references are based on information obtained from locals and are reminiscenced even today.

According to them, Kargil was once known as Purig, which included the areas around Kargil town, the Suru Valley, Shagh(k)ar Chiktan, Pashk(y)um, Bodh Kharbu and Mulbek. The name Purig revolves around several theories. One says that it is derived from the Tibetan 'pot reeks,' which means of 'Tibetan origin,' and possibly dates to the year when a Tibetan empire first established a government in most of Purig. According to scholar Francke, it is obtained from 'burig,' which means the 'daring race' (indicating the Dards). According to another version, Purig means 'tube' and refers to the tubular valleys.

### EARLY OCCUPANTS

Studying the early habitation, one learns that the initial settlers were the Dards who arrived here somewhere as early as 500 BC from various bordering valleys mainly Gilgit, now in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir . They are guessed to be the first settlers though there is no known record of it.

Historians write that Dogra kings, namely, Khan Bahadur and Ghulam Mohammad Khan carried out intense studies to verify the facts of the first settlers here somewhere in the first few decades of the 20th century. They assumed Drass as the original home of the Dards who formerly had roots in Bagrot valley of Gilgit.

In areas like Dah-Hanu, Chiktan-Garkhun, and Shaghar, one still finds ancient language, customs, racial characteristics and religious practices of the Dards. Subsequently, a good ratio of Dards including few of their most ancient tribes got associated with the

Tibetans. Partly to safeguard this ancient tribe or the Aryan race, the government of India in 1970s restricted the entry of tourists into the Dah-Hanu area. Former tourism secretary and writer of several books, Parvez Dewan mentions in his book *Jammu- Kashmir-Ladhak*, that the enforcement of this ban had come after several western guide-books wrote about an incident telling about two German women coming to Dah-Hanu to receive the seed of this '100 per cent pure Aryan people'. It was Pervez Dewan who got this ban lifted for one half of this area during his tenure as tourism secretary in the year 1993.

The Dards of Drass are unquestionably of the Sheeba (Shina) tribe and speak similar language. It is believed that the Dards travelled to Kargil through Baltistan and Deosai, leaving behind few in Baltistan.

Going through a few references, one learns that the Dards were not the first people to settle in Shaghar and Drass. There were seven sons of a man called Poyen Lone who travelled from the Chalaas region (near Naga Parvat) through Deosai.

It is believed that the Dards of Dah-Hanu and nearby places shifted from Yanding and Sachal areas of ancient Gilgit. People of this tribe are spread all over the Khargmang Valley (Baltistan, POK) and mostly settled in the Targon, Tarkati and Barsachal villages.

The process of shifting was similar at the Indian side also as few handful of people from the plains, too, moved to Purig and speedily associated themselves with the Dards where, Dastak Paldan and Seergaya Motik led them. (In Sikandar Khans opinion, the latter name corresponds to the Sanskrit name of Suryamati).

As per Sikandar Khan, Lama Naropar and Guru Urgyan Padma came from Zanskar and took Seergaya Motik and Dastak to Kashmir. Sikandar mentions that these four established the first human habitation in Kashmir, at Pampore.

However, there are no documented links to these stories, though, it is possible that it was Seergaya Motik who constructed the fort along the Indus River in Stakna (Leh). Later, few of them shifted to Purig from Leh, which highlights mainly names of Teesug and

Gangasug, whom Sikandar Khan states as Dards whereas Hashmat Ullah Khan mentions them as Mons. The two built a fort on the Tolon hill near the Indus, which was known as Tolonkhar. Historians believe that they also founded the Achinathang village.

The team of Cho Paldan and Chocho Kunzum along with Teesug-Gangasug decided to settle in 'Stakchey' when entire Purig was ruled by the Dards while the Tibetans controlled only Keteeka Phokar.

### THATHA KHAN—THE LEGEND

Gasho Thatha Khan started the dynasty that ruled over the Shaghar and Chiktan area for almost a thousand years in the 8th or early 9th century AD. Thatha Khan was a descendant of the royal family of Gilgit though there are some other stories attached to it, too. Few say some hunters had found him as an infant on a small hill who grew up to become their king and became the messiah to people as he replaced the cruel man who was ruling over them. The king was once told by a soothsayer that a man will be born to take away his throne and the description fitted well with Thatha and he ordered his killing. The other story tells of a Gilgit prince called Thakan whom his step-brother Shri Bagor Tham wanted dead, which had led to the beginning of a civil war between the supporters of the two.

The story of Thatha says that he was watching a dance when Thatha's rival, the king, sent his men to murder him assuming Thatha too be engrossed in the dance and would not get any chance to react to his soldiers. To Thatha's luck, the affection and love that he shared with the public proved a blessing for him. Thatha was warned about this mischeavious plot by the musicians who intimated him through their songs which prepared Thatha well. Thatha took out his sword and with its tip succeeded in moving out through the chimney to leave the spot.

Thatha fled to a safer place and reached Baltistan (now in POK) through Dara Daltong and Baroo Daltong from Gilgit. Thatha, along with his milk brother Satti Tam (milk brothers are those men who share the same foster mother), entered Kargil through the Churbat La pass (in Batallik sector). It was freezing temperature

and while walking over the frozen Indus River on the banks, they found an unoccupied but fertile place, with a natural spring. Thatha planted a walnut seed there. Locals remember Thatha Khan as Tree of Life, even today.

During their course of moves they reached Kokashu. Thatha found the place attractive and fertile, which tempted him and he planted a sapling from bhoj tree. The locals believe that the trees planted by Thatha Khan existed till Zorawar Singh's regime, i.e., till 1850.

Now survival was becoming difficult and all three of them were not in favour of settling here. During their transit they reached Chachathang at Sindh and went to Bulargo where they were welcomed by nine wild cats sitting on a rock. Here they found Brokpa, Brokpasu Kar, who had already been living here and had constructed a minar or a tower of rukabis (quarter plates of clay). After this, Thatha along with his men reached Brolmo to reach Soth. At Brolmo he met an old women who told him and his men about a lion whom they would find sitting over a rocky boulder at Kharol where Drass and Suru rivers meet. She also taught Thatha how to kill this animal, which he finally killed. The act of bravery earned Thatha fame in the region.

At Soath they were employed by Saaral family of village Akchamal. The eldest member of Thatha's family was employed as a caretaker for the vast land while his milk brother and Thatha were employed to take care of the herds. While on his job one day he fell asleep and dreamt of a group of people digging stones with the help of a goat for the construction of a palace. He shared this dream with his landlord who predicted Thatha to be a king one day. Many years after their stay, Thatha and his group moved to Kokashu and Dargo.

### KOKASHU AND DARGO

Thatha saw the seed grown into a tree, which attracted him and he constructed two houses, Totokhar and Patokhar. Tatokhar belonged to him while Patokhar belonged to his followers.

Climbing Niindom mountain all three had a glimpse of Drass, Gindyal, Chutook, Suru, Karsey Gund, Chachathang, Achnathang

and Khalstey. Collectively they prayed to rule this area, which was later fulfilled.

Several people migrated to Purig/Kargil during Thatha's supremacy. This period saw merging of Ahmed-pa family who took up the profession of farming. Soon came Teesug and Gangasug who joined hands with Thatha Khan and constructed houses for them at Chiktan. One learns this from chellu or the folk songs. Kargil District was also ruled by monarchs such as Cho Paldan and Chocho Kunsung.

During the same period, Samra Chiktan (in Chiktan) was attacked by Turkis in which Chocho Kunsung, Cho paldan, Gangasok and Tisok were taken by Turkis along with some villages.

Thatha Khan recaptured the lost areas by Turkis and again ruled over. Maulvi Hashmat Ullah Khan writes in his book *Tarique-e-Jammu* about Maharaja Gulab Singh's writings that Turkish forces often attacked Ladhak during which they reached Khalstey and entered Chiktan.

### SOT

The ruler of Sot was trapped between two aggressive powers, the minority Tibetans and the majority Dards. Realising the facts that he may not be able to carry along, he simply handed over his kingdom to Thatha.

This development made Thatha's supporters migrate from Gilgit to Sot. After establishing power in Sot, Thatha diverted his attention towards the development. He cleared up the forests to establish Kargil, Poyen, Shilikchay, where he swayed people from Ladakh and Skardu to establish themselves.

Thatha also established Oma Chak Than. He gradually got control of Baru, Minji and other adjacent areas.

After this, Thatha turned to Suru Karchay, which was then ruled by the Tibetans having Phokar as its capital. The Tibetan government had begun to show signs of downfall. Thatha assigned this area to his son Navaldey. Their dynasty came to an end a few generations later, with the immensely popular ruler Lde Cho.



Navaldehy's eldest brother Boti Khan alias Moi Gasho was granted the main Sot and Shaghar Chiktan territory. Their third brother preferred to settle in Gund.

### SPREAD OF BUDDHISM AND ISLAM

The period between 1060-1090 saw the spread of Buddhism and this was a major development during the rule of Abdal's grandson Chhabzangs. Lama Lotsava Rinchan Zangpo would preach the Buddhist gospel whenever he crossed the Indian plains to reach Western Tibet. Lotsava got Lha khangs (Buddhist temples where Lha means God) constructed at Chiktan and Wakha (near Mulbekh). It is believed that it was he who got the stone idol of Chamba Devi (goddess) built at Mulbek.

### 15 CENTURY PERIOD

Subsequently, the next important era is of Amrood Cho, also famous as Mureed Khan (c.1450-1475). This was when Islam started spreading its wings in Purig under the influence of Saint Ameer Kabeer Syed Ali Hamdani and his disciple Syed Muhammad Noor Bakhsh. (According to some historians, Syed Mohammad Noor Bakhsh was a disciple of Khawaja Ishaq of Khatlan and it was the Khawaja who was a khalifa or disciple of Saint Ameer Kabeer.)

It is said that Amrood Cho had an alternate Islamic name which indicates that he had converted to Islam.

Amrood's elder son and successor Dooroo Cho was given the nickname Alddor Cho by the people as he was a very slack and a cruel ruler. During his rule, the secretariat of the state collapsed because of his misgovernance. Later, Gyalpo of Tingmo annexed the areas between Khaltse Bridge and the Kanji Nallah. Gyalbom Aldey Raja Phokar took Suru and Karchey (Kartse).

Dooroo died childless and this led to his younger brother Habin Cho to succeed. During Habib's command, Mir Sham-ud-Din was spreading Islam in Purig. Mir was a saint from Iraq and a follower of the son of the great Syed Muhammad Noor Bakhsh of Khurasan. Habib Cho was awarded Shina (Shiete) doctrine whereas his father

had previously converted to Islam. Many missionaries from Kashmir and Baltistan carried the message of Islam from village to village.

Kargil District was unofficially divided two territories controlled by two major and several minor Aghas (religious teachers) before the political setup was established or election began to be held somewhere in 1950s. During this period the general public followed a system on festivals, where each family would present a small offering or token, in cash, to the Agha which in return owed faithfulness to them. The system still continues but certainly with a difference.

In the meanwhile, the king of Khaplu, Shaghar and Skardu along with Habib Cho came in action together and attacked Leh to get back the territory Dooroo had lost to Gyapo.

### 1510-1535

After Habib Cho, his son Ahmed Malik Khan ruled the area. During his rule, Sultan Saeed Waai, a Turkman, attacked Kargil and entered Zanskar from where his forces reached Suru and Sot. Ahmed Malik came under the rule of Sultan Syed. Sultan designated Malik as wazir (minister) of Sot area and moved to Hanula via Churbut and reached Baltistan while his son, Sultan Sikander and his force Commander-in-Chief, Haider Gurgan moved to Kashmir.

### 1535- 1555

Khokhor Bagram ruled after his father Ahmed. To bring back normalcy at the eastern border, he maintained a close friendship with Gyapo Tsewang Namgyal. Tsering Malik, Khokhor's son, was deputed as the governor of Chiktan. Tsering was a man of high ambition with good foresight. To be the king, he joined Gyapo Jamyang Namgyal to the royal 'Darbar' a gathering witnessed by the king, to learn the trades of a king. During this course of time, Jamyang took a strong liking for Tsering's wife. Tsering divorced her and handed her over to Gyapo. Later, she gave birth to a child who grew up as Nawang Namgyal. The unpleasantness didn't end as in return, Jamyang gave his own daughter in marriage to Tsering though he was happy to have obtained a grip in Purig.

It is said that Gyapo got Tsering arrested at Matho and jailed Tsering's new queen at Stok. These arrests made Tsering's supporters to revolt with arms, and they attacked Leh. They achieved their mission and got them freed from the prison. No doubt; time is a big healer and Gyapo and Tsering once again developed good relations.

Tsering announced Chiktan an independent kingdom, which disturbed Khokhor Baghram as he felt a threat of a civil war between Tsering and Ragyal. Bagram performed wisely and saved the kingdom from being divided.

Time moved on and Tsering took control over Chiktan area while Ragyal took over Sot. Tsering didn't have any intentions to return and hence gifted Bodh Kharbu and some neighbouring villages to Ali Sher. Ali positioned his soldiers at Bodh Kharbu fort and he himself moved ahead. The soldiers on their way back home burnt and destroyed several Ladakhi villages.

Angry Jamyang Namgyal and his army suddenly appeared at Bodh Kharbu after travelling through the Fatu La, a pass existing even today on NH-1D. Being Friday, the Balti soldiers were offering prayers at Chhorbas Spang. As Jamyang was a Buddhist, the Balti soldiers joined him to get Bodh Kharbo fort and thus this area was made free from Ali Sher.

Gyapo made formal receiving of Tsering at Bodh Kharbu and didn't interfere to pull back his independence. Soon Ali Sher was told about the defeat of his soldiers and he united with Balti princes to attacked Leh, making Jamyang to rush back.

Jamyang and Tsering retained their thrones. Tsering added Pashkum to his territories by overriding in a dispute that revolved around a love affair. He annexed villages like Kannaur, Minji, etc.

### 1600-1610

Sultan Malik inherited the throne of Sot along with a feeling of resentment against Tsering from his father Rigyal Malik. Sultan Malik attacked and took Chiktan and Pashkum under his control. During this battle, Tsering and his son Sankhan fought

courageously but both were killed. Sultan Malik imprisoned Sankhan's minor sons, Adam and Chhosaraang Malik Youkma Kharboo.

Chiktan being dominated by Buddhists had many locals related to the king of Leh. They gathered and started agitating against the people in control of Sot. They also led a delegation to Ali Sher Khan who by then was the Maqpon of Skardu. These people also contacted Senge Namgyal of Leh, for assistance but nothing worked out at his front.

In those days there lived in Skardu a doctor from Chiktan, Chozang Kashi, who had cured Ali Sher's queen of some disease and for which Ali Sher Khan wanted to offer him some token. Instead of a reward, all he asked of Ali Sher was that the delegation from Chiktan be listened and attended well to their plea. Ali Sher responded positively to his request and also sent his Wazir and nobles to Sultan Malik who let go the two minor princes from imprisonment. Taking a lead on the positive response by Sultan Malik, the Baltis of Skardu made Adam take back the ancestral throne. This victory united Pashkum and Chiktan became independent of Sot. 'Once again the sun has risen', sung Adam Malik's wife.

Senge Namgyal and his men attacked Purig after the invasion of Chiktan. Senge took control of Wakha and Mulbek. Simultaneously, Kartsey and Suru also listed on his card. During the regime of Sultan Malik's son, Muhammad Senge prepared his soldiers to attack Sot for which he took help from Adam Khan of Skardu. Adam Khan was very instrumental as on his request Ali Mardan Khan, the Mughal Government of Kashmir, dispatched a group of soldiers of the Mughal army to help Senge at Purig.

The two, Mughal and Balti forces, met Senge Namgyal at Karpokhar. According to credible sources, the Mughals won. As a result, Suru and Karchey were freed from the clutches of Leh. However, Wakha and Mulbekh continued to remain under Leh.

The people of Kargil believe that when the Turkmen entered Kargil at Pasri Kahr, Muhammad Sultan, son of Sultan Malik, failed their attacks along with the Leh army.

## LAST INDEPENDENT EMPERORS

Mirza Sultan ruled over Sot and later his throne was passed on to Mirza Beig, Baghrum Beig, Jehangir Beig and Yahya Khan. During Baghrum Khan's tenure, Sot-Karchay got together against Leh. In alliance they captured Kharol, Chhotok and some neighbouring villages. It is said that there were a few people of Leh Gyapo who worked secretly for him in the Sot region. Gyapo launched a counter attack with their help. A Gyapo named Raftan was placed in Chutak and Karsey.

After Jehangir Beig, his son Yahya Khan sat on the throne from 1780-1810. Years 1810 to 1834 saw Salaam Khan, son of Yahya Khan, carrying ahead his father's throne. During his regime, the Dogras conquered Purig, Baltistan and Leh.

This period witnessed frequent army movement. In the year 1834, Maharaja Gulab Singh of Jammu sent Zorawar Singh, his legendary army Chief, to annex Ladakh. General Zorawar Singh came to the valley through Warwan Pass where he encountered Ladakhi forces at Langkarchey, 35 kms from Kargil towards Sankoo, under the command of General Murup Namgyal. The first encounter was held at Lankartse near Sankoo with the Dogra army. In a fierce battle, General Zorawar Singh defeated the Ladakhi forces and marched ahead towards Leh. He crushed the reinforcement under the command of General Banka Pa at Mulbek. To sustain his troops, General Zorawar Singh constructed a fort in proper Kargil near the present steel bridge at Poyen. Kargil thus got prominence in the Dogra rule. The Dogras unified the kingdoms of Baltistan, Purik, Zaskar and Ladakh and the entire region became a part of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. The region was divided into three divisions of Skardoo, Kargil and Leh.

The army at Ladhak was not well equipped due to which they faced hurdles to fight back with the Dogra army whereas this proved a positive point for the Dogra army. It is believed that when the invaders reached Pashkum, peak winters had set in, which created discomfort for the soldiers of Dogra army. They sent a message to the king of Leh that they would withdraw if he would pay them Rs 15,000. But this was rejected as the queen didn't appreciate this.

Zorawar moved with his men to a place near Sankoo and stayed till the end of winters. Taking benefit of this situation, the Ladakhi soldiers prepared themselves to some limit. The Ladakhis attacked the Dogra soldiers in the month of April and faced defeat. Subsequently, in 1839, rebellion broke out where Sukamir Rahim Khan of Chiktan and Hussain of Pashkum led it secretly. Zorawar moved to Kargil along with a large force to bring the situation under control. In a joint venture Dogra army and Ladakh army came together and conquered Baltistan, bringing together that area with the rest of Ladakh after a long time.

The Dogras appointed Salaam Khan, the defeated king, as the Chief Administrator of the areas over where his father and their ancestors before had ruled. His descendants, later on, continued to occupy senior positions in the government even in the second half of the 20th century, after the state acceded to India.

### KARGIL AS WE KNOW IT NOW

Kargil, which suddenly came into focus the world over in 1999, on account of the war fought between India and Pakistan, is now a quiet town slowly inching towards development. It is located in the Suru valley at an altitude of 2704 meters above sea level, Kargil is a small town scattered along the Suru River, which flows from the glaciated regions of Zaskar and drains into the Drass River just short of Post 43. The Suru valley itself falls in the central part of the trans-Himalayan Zone and is surrounded by rugged mountain ranges of older sedimentary and granite rocks. With the area spanning between 30 to 35 degree North latitude and 75 to 77 degree East-West longitude, Kargil is surrounded by Baramulla, Srinagar and Doda districts in the southwest, Leh District in the east, Himachal Pradesh in the south, and Pakistan in the northwest.

It lies in the north-east of Kashmir Valley at a distance of 205 kms from Srinagar with a geographical area of 14,036 sq kms. This is of relevance as Kargil is equidistant from Srinagar, Leh, Skardu and Zaskar. Travellers used to consider Kargil a major transit point via Zojilla, before the partition of 1947, as this pass would connect

it with Kargil and beyond. Even today, Zojilla remains the lifeline of the region. The whole area consists of high rocky mountains devoid of any natural vegetation. The population of the district is above 1 lakh having a density of 7 persons per square km against the average of 59 persons per sq km at state level. Ninety-nine per cent of the population is schedule tribe. The district has a high altitude area in the country ranging from 8,000 to 18,000 ft above sea level.

This high-altitude valley is surrounded by several rugged mountains which are dotted with numerous villages, each with its own unique history and beauty. Village Pashkyum is believed to be first inhabited by the region's early colonizers—the Indo-Aryan Mons who had traversed the Great Himalayan range. Kargil has also witnessed varied Dard migrants from down the Indus and the neighbouring Gilgit valley and also nomads from the Tibetan highlands. These migrants have left vibrant marks of mixed cultural influences in the region, which has been responsible for initiating Buddhism, farming and animal husbandry in the region. The Mons are believed to have introduced Buddhism in the region while the Tibetan nomads created the tradition of herding and animal husbandry. The Dards and the Balti migrants initiated farming in this mountainous, region too.

Kargil is blessed with all qualities of paradise, which is yet to be explored to its fullest. Being located in Suru valley, it is blessed with a unique geographical site that makes it a magnificent place for adventure sports like trekking, mountaineering, rock climbing and river rafting which, however, have not been exploited to full potential due to lack of popularity and remoteness of this once war-ravaged land. Kargil is also the second largest township of Ladakh region and was referred as the 'place between castles.' The district is famous as the land of the Aghas, the religious scholars of Shia sect who have a stronghold on the local population. However, the age-old traditions of Buddhist origin are still discernible and have managed to survive as a sub-culture. Besides being witness to an awe-inspiring and breathtaking sunset, Kargil is also home to numerous age-old Buddhist monasteries as well as Imambaras of the Shia sect of Islam.

there are numerous such memorials astride this road in honour of fallen heroes of defence forces. The Zojila Pass is still a challenge for the travellers and has a famous historical background. It is believed that during the first Indo-Pak war of 1948, a column of tanks made its way through Zojila Pass to surprise the Pakistani army. It was the Madras Sappers who were tasked during 1948 to build the road between Baltal and Zojila in a month's time. The Indian army history narrates the squally weather conditions under which this herculean task was undertaken as the soldiers were not as equipped with sophisticated machinery as they are today. They worked round the clock undeterred by frequent snowfall and consistent enemy shelling to complete the task within a month. This act saved entire Ladakh from the enemy and it has always been a motivational factor for the troops of Indian army till date.

Zojila Pass at 11,640 feet runs through a very narrow and treacherous road with huge mountains on one side and a deep gorge on the other. It is the first point where one gets to see snow and travellers are excited to see this. On the way one passes by herds of sheep with the nomadic masters who travel to Ladakh in summers from various lower parts of Jammu and Kashmir. To see the nomadic tribes, called Bakerwals, travel all the way from Jammu is also an experience in itself.

The tall and thin womenfolk knit their hair in multiple plaits covering their faces with a scarf in half moon shape, wearing a salwar (loose Indian trouser worn by Indian women) and full skirted tunic with long sleeves. These women walk their way complimenting themselves with lot of traditional silver jewellery and a gold 'nath' (nose ring) which is a typical ornament amongst them.

Zojila Pass is the lifeline for Kargil and for the locals it is a vital link connecting them to the outer world. Apathy spreads its hands on locals in the month of November when they get disconnected due to heavy snowfall, landslides and avalanches closing the pass till as late as May. The actual hardships and miseries of life that then unfold are in stark contrast to the beauty that is seen during the summer.



After an hour of tiresome and challenging journey from Zojila Pass, one can see some habitation at Matyan, the first inhabited place. Matyan is the first village after Zojila and is 20 km short of Drass. The village is located in the shadow of large mountains with splendid beauty, which is experienced only in the summer months. Late Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru has also mentioned Drass in his autobiography during his visit to Amarnath shrine. The villagers of Matyan speak a local dialect along with Kashmiri language. The villagers are pleasant to interact with and run a couple of tea stalls on kerb sides. Though these are not fully equipped with quality food supplies but are a welcome commodity in the severe cold environs. Matyan bears the brunt of bone chilling winters and gets disconnected even from its neighbouring town Drass. This condition has enforced the people to plea for a temporary makeshift location during the peak winters.

Exactly after 1.6 km from Matyan comes Draupadi Kund, a water body on the road side with sparkling green water at 10,840 feet. Legend has it and so has the local belief reinstated the fact that it is associated with Draupadi of Mahabharata era. It is believed that often Draupadi would come down the hill to bathe where a temple is believed to exist, which is not visible to the naked eye. However, Parvez Diwan, in his book *Jammu-Kashmir and Ladakh* states, "I suspect that the belief dates to the 1830s, when first Hindu soldier arrived in Ladakh."

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Driving along this stretch of the highway between August and September, one may come across the beautiful Magpies which can be spotted initially at Zojila Pass and later at short intervals ahead.

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Kargil is known for rich apricots which change the entire valley into a beautiful orange hue spreading an awesome fragrance during the summer months from June to September.

This kaleidoscopic town of Kargil, which is situated midway between Srinagar and Leh on the Srinagar-Leh highway (NH-1D), is only accessible by road as there is no air and rail facility at the moment, though there is a small airstrip that has been constructed by the Airport Authority of India, which is used for Indian Air Force flights. There are proposals, however, which are in active consideration for extension and expansion of the existing runway to make it operational for commercial flights. The nearest airports to this town are located at Srinagar and Leh, of which there is no surface communication during winters towards Srinagar as the Zojila Pass is covered in almost 40 feet of snow then. Otherwise, besides the winters, there is state-owned transport services that can be hired throughout the year. Private taxis are also available on hire through travel agents from Srinagar and Leh. Tourists travelling in own vehicles are advised to tank up at Srinagar as the price of petrol and diesel is cheaper in Srinagar than in Kargil and beyond.

The first major halt in the journey via road from Srinagar to Kargil and beyond can be taken at Sonamarg, a beautiful meadow filled with the golden rays of the sun shining through the blue skies. The drive through Sonamarg, which is about 125 km from Srinagar, presents an amazing facet of the alpine countryside of Kashmir and the Greater Himalayan range and it seems as if an artist has drawn a portrait of nature in all its glory on a canvas. Tourists can take a halt at Sonamarg to enjoy the surrounding beauty, sip the local tea, 'Kehwa,' flavored with saffron and almonds, from the sprinkling of kiosks along the road which also cater for a breakfast of tandoori paranthas and curd. The tall and fresh green pine trees, which are distinctly covered in snow, and the snow-clad mountains remind one of a white Christmas.

The route from Srinagar to Kargil was badly affected due to militancy in Kashmir and tourists generally flew from Delhi to Leh. This journey deprived the locals from earning a livelihood as

tourists seldom travelled to Leh through this route. Nonetheless, this route was devoid of traffic and was a shorter approach to Leh considering the long treacherous route through Manali and Rohtang Pass, which was not travelled upon due to fear of terrorist attacks till the recent years. However, the few tourists who travelled on this route were overjoyed to witness the tranquility and serenity of the area and the message soon spread by word of mouth and tourists started flocking this route too. Many enthusiastic travellers, mostly youth, today, prefer travelling through this route for cherishing the experience of nature and the route less travelled.

Kargil in recent times has also served as an important trade and transit centre for the Central Asian merchants due to its unique equidistant location from Srinagar, Leh and Skardu. However, the famed Kargil-Skardu silk route has been closed since 1948.

The roads from Srinagar leading to Kargil are broad and in good condition till Kangan. Even though the geographical landscape changes from Kangan to Sonamarg in a most refreshing manner, the winding roads sometimes cause discomfort to the travellers due to mountains and motion sickness. However, the sight of lush green riverbeds, orchards of apples, walnuts and apricots act as a balm that soothes the senses which then takes away the discomfort. The roads get further steeper and steeper till Zojila Pass, which is 3450 meters above sea level. The Srinagar-Zojila axis is secured round the clock by the soldiers of Indian army patrolling the area.

There are many army camps enroute ready to provide 24x7 assistance to travellers, if needed. There are steep bends, which are not only tiring but also scary. Tourists are advised to be slow and alert while driving and carry a route map to be on a safer side.

The travellers driving on their own must be very careful before they kick off from Srinagar and must be equipped with a spare tyre and plastic sheet to cope up against any odds as beyond Kangan there are no workshops till one reaches Drass.

Travellers come across a bend, Captain Morh, named after an army officer of Border Roads Organisation (BRO) who lost his life there. A memorial has been constructed here in his honour and

there are numerous such memorials astride this road in honour of fallen heroes of defence forces. The Zojila Pass is still a challenge for the travellers and has a famous historical background. It is believed that during the first Indo-Pak war of 1948, a column of tanks made its way through Zojila Pass to surprise the Pakistani army. It was the Madras Sappers who were tasked during 1948 to build the road between Baltal and Zojila in a month's time. The Indian army history narrates the squally weather conditions under which this herculean task was undertaken as the soldiers were not as equipped with sophisticated machinery as they are today. They worked round the clock undeterred by frequent snowfall and consistent enemy shelling to complete the task within a month. This act saved entire Ladakh from the enemy and it has always been a motivational factor for the troops of Indian army till date.

Zojila Pass at 11,640 feet runs through a very narrow and treacherous road with huge mountains on one side and a deep gorge on the other. It is the first point where one gets to see snow and travellers are excited to see this. On the way one passes by herds of sheep with the nomadic masters who travel to Ladakh in summers from various lower parts of Jammu and Kashmir. To see the nomadic tribes, called Bakerwals, travel all the way from Jammu is also an experience in itself.

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with a centrally located small township and is a convenient base for a three-day trek. A trek across the sub-ranges passes through some of the most amazing, unbelievable and beautiful upland villages with flower-sprinkled meadows on both sides of the 4500 m high Umbala Pass, falling enroute. This trek also culminates at the famed holy cave of Amarnath, taking three days to reach the pious place for Hindu pilgrimage.

Drass first appeared on world map as the second coldest inhabited place in the world after Siberia. It has a record of temperature dipping to minus 60° in the year 1995. Lately, in 1999, Drass became famous due to the extensive coverage of the Indo-Pak war by electronic as well as print media. Most of the battles of 'Kargil War' were fought in this region at Tiger Hill, Tololing and Mushkho.

The valley in Drass opens out in a highland plateau making it flat and wide in comparison to Kargil. The four months of spring change Drass into a picturesque landscape as the surrounding hillsides transform into lush green pastures speckled with a variety of awesome looking wild flowers. Willow trees and streams of sparkling water add on to its beauty. Seeing the adorable and irresistible beauty of Drass makes it hard to even visualize the hardships of the piercing winters which plummets the mercury to minus (-) 40° in this region.

Never heard of before, Drass now has prominent landmarks in the national tourism itinerary such as Mushkho, which has the Valley of Flowers. Tiger Hill is another attraction as is the Drass War Memorial at the foothills of Tololing. These are the famous battlefields where Indian soldiers fought the toughest battle.

Early morning summers are beautiful and as the day progresses, the sun does become piercing at times. At this period, one has to protect the skin with a good sun block or sunscreen lotion. Tourists are advised not to tax themselves the very first day and drink lots of water or fluids in any form. Alcohol is a strict no at such heights.

From autumn and up to early spring, Drass remains under a thick white blanket of snow and is subject to frequent snow storms and avalanches, which makes travel a high risk adventure. However,

hats off to the inhabitants who have been negotiating the dreadful Zojila Pass right till mid-December for years during unsafe period and it is only their expertise in crossing the pass in such a risky state that has made them weather and terrain hardened.

The inhabitants of Drass are mainly of the Dards race. An Aryan race is believed to have originally migrated to the high valleys of the western Himalayas from the Central Asian steppes. They communicate in Shina unlike the Tibetan originated Ladakhi dialects spoken elsewhere in Ladakh region.

The journey from Drass to Kargil is a great drive in itself and one comes across mountains in different hues and a combination of vegetation. Moreover, the green signature of Kargil and allied areas has increased ever since the Indian army moved in as they have taken up tree plantation through 'shram daan' and conservation of natural flora.

The Suru, after receiving the combined waters of the Drass and Shingo rivers a short distance north of Kargil, joins the Indus at Marol in Baltistan, which is now on the POK side of Line of Control.

Slanting rooftops on road sides covered with heaps of fodder, bundles of stacked wood, women washing clothes at the bank of the Suru and giggling around are great glimpses offered by this laidback town. Children playing cricket on the streets seems to be a favorite pass time and is the only modern game played by children and adults alike, which is a far cry from their traditional games of polo and archery. It is also the second largest urban center of Ladakh where the denizens are fond of archery and polo. These are customary games of theirs and while archery is Kargil centric, polo is primarily played in Drass. Men of all age groups are seen shooting arrows as this is the traditional game which is still a craze amongst the locals.

This far-flung town too prayed for the Indian cricket team to bring home the Cricket World Cup 2011. This is a huge development as not very long back television viewing was not allowed but now there is a huge fan following for Indian cinema and sports.

Just a few hundred meters short of Channi Gund, which is about seven km from Kargil, one notices a signboard on a bend depicting a stern looking bearded man in black turban with few scribbles in Persian below the picture. He is the Iranian revolutionary whom the people of Kargil follow till date. Even though his memory has faded in Iran itself but the people here have preserved his followership. He is known as Imam Ayatollah Khomeini. It is this Shia dominated belt that is forging bonds with Iran and has granted impetus to the trend of youngsters visiting Iran for religious training. Kargil was directly influenced by the Iranian revolution led by Imam Khomeini in the year of 1979 and this impact can be clearly seen in the markets of Kargil town.

Kargil was once the trade and transit centre of the Pan-Asian trade network and has been the gateway for caravans of silk, brocade, tea, carpets, felts, poppy and ivory to China, Tibet, Yarkand and Kashmir.

Art lovers can see some of the finest examples of architecture in and around Kargil. There are two Imambaras in Trespone and Sankoo villages near Kargil, which attract tourists for their Turkish style of architecture. There is also Jamid Masjid at the centre of Kargil town. Traces of Buddhism can also be seen in a few villages as there are few engraved pictures of Buddhist deities which divulge the Buddhist impact and the presence of this faith. These are few in numbers and hence are not very exposed to the outer world.

Day long excursion can be taken to Mulbek or to the Suru Valley to get a feel of the grandeur of the Himalayan range from close quarters. There are ancient foot bridges known as 'jhula' or swinging bridges which are made of wooden planks and secured with tough ropes. Standing on these bridges, one gets a splendid view of the terraced township sweeping down the hillsides.

The shopkeepers maintain a cool look on their faces and it is generally observed that most of them have a laidback attitude. A stroll in the ancient market will find it flooded with Chinese goods but if one is looking for traditional items then you need to lookout for attractive flint and tobacco pouches, travelling hookahs and



crafted brass kettles with small cups or pyalies that are the real souvenirs one needs to carry back home.

The womenfolk are not allowed to get their pictures clicked by strangers but one might be lucky to capture the picture of the Minaroa or Brokpas, a tribe that claims descent from the army of Alexander of Macedonia and are not shy or conservative by nature. They can be seen in the town market either walking or selling apricot oil, dry and fresh apricot kernels and very tiny but sour green grapes. One can recognize them from far as they are tall and dress up differently from the localites in Kargil town.

### **IQBAL BRIDGE OVER SURU RIVER DURING WINTERS**

Walking along the Suru, leaving behind the crowded market of Kargil town, one passes by various army camps. On crossing the Iqbal Bridge, a steel bridge across Suru, one heads along a steady climb leading to a junction near the Indian Oil Corporation Petroleum pump where one stretch continues towards Leh, which is 200 km further, while the bifurcated road leads to the Khurbathang Plateau. This was barren till a few years back but now there are plans to develop this area into a hub of activity to include civil administration blocks, tourism infrastructure and hospitals.

The geographical features keep changing as one keeps going ahead. Fields are cultivated and lush green from June through August and the womenfolk are seen carrying out agricultural practices while the men are seen busy basking in the sun exchanging views of the local town. Due to early onset of severe winters, crops are grown here for only few months leaving the land barren for almost three quarters of the year.

The flow of many rivers like Suru, Drass and Indus has turned many parts of the Suru valley into fertile fields. The summers are warm and dry whereas winters dip below freezing point. Annual rainfall is not more than 40 cms and natural vegetation mainly consists of bushy shrubs, although poplars and willows have been introduced lately. Poplars and willows have not adapted well to the Kargil climate as they have adapted to Drass. Pencil Cedar,

Chermying and Burchay are the trees that are found here in good numbers and are also the source for firewood and timber. Nun and Kun peaks having a height of 24,000 feet and 23,000 feet respectively above sea level also lie in the Kargil district.

Kargil is prone to snow avalanches. Around four feet of snow is experienced in Drass sector and three-four feet of snow in Suru and Zanskar area. In the winters of 1986, snow avalanches at Kharboo near Chanigund, Shak-kar in Zanskar and Stakpa in Sankoo washed away forty people along with their belongings and livestock.

A land sinking accident at Village Tumail in 1987 damaged the whole village comprising about forty household. One hamlet comprising five houses was completely washed away in 1988 at Tse-Tse-Sna near Manji Gongma owing to constant rainfall. Huge damages were also experienced in the entire district.

Measles among children in the winter of 1986 killed 90 children in Sankoo area of Kargil. Timely action taken by the district administration helped to check the outbreak of diseases. Expert doctors from the State as well as from the Centre were brought to Kargil. The local Army Hospital also played an important role in providing medical assistance.

Kargil by itself is a peaceful little town ideal for tourists to break journey midway to Leh, Zanskar or Srinagar depending on where one has started their journey. Come summers and you would find charming picnic spots dotting the banks of the Suru River where quite a few locals and those earning a living in and around Kargil frequent. As the winters approach, there is an exodus of the locals to the more 'warmer' plains and only the bravehearts stay back to usher in the winters and make use of the stacked firewood.

Just about after an hour's drive from Kargil town one starts viewing the colored flags of Mulbek, which is also the first predominantly Buddhist area. Chang, the fermented local drink, is only available in Buddhist dominated areas and is a huge hit amongst the local Buddhists.

## FAMOUS PERSONALITIES POST INDEPENDENCE

Aga Syed Mehdi Shah was the first member of Praja Sabha during the Maharaja's regime while Aga Syed Ibrahim Shah was the first Kargali who represented Kargil as Member of Legislative Assembly in the State Assembly. Kachu Mohammad Ali Khan was the first Kargali who became a Minister in the State Cabinet while Munshi Habib Ullah was the first Kargali to hold the rank of a Cabinet Minister in the State government in the year 1984. The first Kargali to become a Member of Parliament in the year 1989 was Mohhammad Hassan Commander.

Kargil became an Autonomous Hill Development Council in 2003. Qamar Ali Akhoon became the first Chairman and Executive Councilor of the Hill Development Council, Kargil. The first Kargali to hold the post of District Development Commissioner, Kargil was Kachu Isfandyar Khan, who was the first to get through the Kashmir Administrative Service; later he was conferred IAS, the first to ever get such status by a Kargali.

Kachu Mehboob Ali Khan of Sanjak Kargil is the first to join the Indian Civil Service through which he joined Indian Railway Services while Lama Chhosphel Zotpa is the first Kargali to hold the post of Vice Chairman, National Commission of Schedule Caste and Tribe.

Shri Mohammad Shafi Wani was the first Kargali to hold the post of Inspector General of Police. He was followed by Hasan Khan, who held the post of Deputy Inspector General of Police. He later retired and fought elections on Congress mandate in 1996 but lost by 22,000 votes against Qamar Ali Akhoon (National Conference). Khan fought again in 1998 for a Member of Parliament seat on National Conference ticket and won. He became a Member of Parliament for the second time on an Independent ticket in the year 2009 defeating P. Namgyal of Leh.

Urgain Dorjai is the first police officer of Kargil to receive President's Police Award for his exemplary work displayed during snow avalanche rescue operations while it was Kachu Sikandar Khan who was the first scholar of Kargil who has authored many books, including *Qadeem Ladakh*.

## CHAPTER 2

# Masters of Town

The mountainous district of Kargil has two main influential religious organisations, namely, Islamia School Kargil (ISK) and Imam Khomeini Memorial Trust (IKMT). These two organisations actually can be quoted as the Masters of town in their respective capacities.

The establishment of Islamia School, Kargil dates back to 1951 by the Unjeman Isna-Asharia. Unjeman is composed mainly of Sheikhs and Agha members of Ladakh.

Islamia School, Kargil is one of the premier institution of the Shia's and has a strong historical impression in the history of Kargil Shias.

The Shias of Kargil have been known worldwide for their orthodox Islamic views even before the revival of Muslim fundamentalism in Iran. The people of this quiet district have remained under the control of local Ulemas or the religious scholars, the Sheikhs and Aghas, who in turn owe their trustworthiness to some internationally acknowledged Mujtahids (Jurisprudence) of Iran and Iraq. To obtain theological studies, the Ulema's go to Iran and Iraq.

There they spend 10 to 15 years and learn religious studies which in return is spread among local masses on their return to their native place. Their learning is strictly practiced and its close influence is prominently observed among the womenfolk. The girls from their pre-adolescence days over here are seen covering their head with scarves. Western dresses are totally banned. Although the new generation wants to try these, but they are in awe of the

“fatwa.” However, except wearing Hijab, there are no restrictions in wearing dresses.

It is believed that the local Shias remained divided almost vertically in their religious and spiritual matters. One division was looking towards Agha Khui of Iraq for leadership while the other one was under the influence of Late Ayatollah Khomeini, a revolutionary leader of Iran.

Twenty years after the death of the stern looking bearded man, the posters of Islamic cleric of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini today still exist on the Kargil-Drass National Highway. This round black turban wearing cleric has his huge photo frames, posters in homes, shops, government and non-government establishments. It is very interesting to note that his pictures have been existing in the region even in the presence of Sunnis, though in minority.

The Sunnis, few in number, are limited to Drass sector and mostly belong to the ‘Hanfised’ sect. In addition to this, there are also followers of Ahle-Hadis, approximately five hundred in number, and are mostly found in a village called Muradbagh near Drass.

Religion plays a very vital and powerful role in the lives of the people of Kargil though the newer generation is turning out to be modern in their appearances, which was considered a sin few years back. However, have maintained the sanctity of their religion and have protected their customs, traditions and rituals so far.

Among the locals, the Shias in this part of the world follow the Houzia Elmiya in Qum (Kum). Among the local Shias, the Aghas consider themselves as the descendants of Prophet Mohammad. Each Agha has domain over one or several villages and enjoys all the privileges extended by the villagers. There is religious practice of paying taxes called ‘Khumus.’ Khumus is 20 per cent of the total savings of one Shia family during the year. It is a privilege of the local Agha who are allowed by the Mujtahids located in Iran and Iraq to spend half of the total Khumus on religious activities and the next half on needy folks of the area.

One of the Agha mentioned that during the pre-partition period,

the share of Khumus used to be sent to Iran and Iraq through the pilgrims going for Haj or Ziyarat to Najaf (Iraq) and Qum (Iran).

Majority of Shias used to go to Iraq for studies; however, the partition and war between India and Pakistan resulted in a lean period for aspirant scholars of Kargil who could not go to Iraq for higher studies. This encouraged the local Sheikhs and Aghas to start thinking in terms of arranging for higher education at Kargil itself and this became the genesis of establishment of the first Islmaic institution of Kargil.

Fifties was a period which saw some transformation here, when Sheikh Mohd Mufeed of Chutumal was in the process of setting up the first Islamic institution at Kargil in the form of Islamic School. Sayeed Haider Rizvi of Sanko, who had Munshi Habib Ulah family under his influence, opposed opening of the school in Kargil.

The main reason for the rivalry to Islamic School was the apprehension towards decreasing of the hold of Aghas and apportioning of Khumus.

After many obstacles and exchanges of thoughts put by Agha Sayeed Haider Rizvi, Islamia School of Kargil was finally established by Sheikh Mohd Mufeed Chutumal at Kargil in 1952-53 with donations collected locally. Finally, the hardship faced by patron Mufeed brought some fruit and the Shia Mujtahids of Najaf (Iraq) and Qum (Kum) (Iran) issued "Fatwas" blessing the school and authorising it to collect Khumus.

The school has a beautiful and splendid building in the heart of the Kargil market consisting of 23 rooms around a huge courtyard where meetings and assemblies are held occasionally. There are special arrangements for the women who visit religious functions. There are wired meshes as covering or partition so that the purdah custom is maintained.

The Islamia School imparts education in Arabic and Persian, and students after getting command over these languages are sent to Iran for higher studies. With the passing time, the Islamia School has gained a very special and respected place under the guidance of its present supremo Sheikh Mohammadi.

Dressed in a robe, Mohammadi plays a vital role in the town even in managing the town affairs of general public. Apart from the local studies, the school also plays a strong role in political arena. Such an example is of 2009 when an independent rebel candidate, Ghulam Hassan Khan, an Ex DIG, was backed by the Islamia School, Kargil who had defeated the Congress candidate, P. Namgyal for the Ladakh seat. Islamia School also shares a very close association with the National Conference.

The school had been well supported by the locals but felt the jolt when Imam Khomeini Memorial Trust was formed as a different organisation. The Imam Khomeini Memorial Trust along with the Islamic School, Kargil are the two main bodies that control the social and domestic matters of the residents and one does not generally find any record of incidents in the police stations; though lately there have been a few, but it is not a common practice.

The Imam Khomeini Trust, a voluntary organisation comprising mostly youth, is not appreciated by the orthodox believers of the society existing in the region and mostly criticized by the Islamia School and its supporters. Imam Khomeini Memorial Trust (IKMT) is the offshoot of Islamia School born on 28 September 1989. Sheikh Hussain Zakri and former Chief Executive Councillor of Kargil, Asgar Ali Karbalie had raised the organisation.

There came a twist when a group of the Islamic School, Kargil, mostly comprising the younger generation of Sheiks and Aghas under the leadership of Sheikh Mohd Hussain Zakri, who did not wish to follow the path shown by old Sheikhs and Aghas, revolted and entered the religious organisation IKMT, with a view to minimise the status of Islamia School in Kargil. No doubt, it was a highly inspired by revolution in Iran led by Imam Khomeini which played an important role in forming IKMT and finally it was shaped on July 13, 1989 at Kargil under the Chairmanship of Sheikh Mohd Hussain Zakri.

The main objective of IKMT was to strengthen the Islamic spirit and to spread modern education among the youth, especially living in the far-flung areas of the district. People in the area, mostly the younger and modern generation, are of the opinion that IKMT is

the only organisation (though openly they don't criticise ISK because of the fear of Sheikhs and Aghas who control most of the population of the city) which can motivate the necessity of education among the children and upliftment of the people without any discrimination of cast, creed, colour and religion.

Influenced by the Islamic revolution of Iran, IKMT decided to intervene in the socio-economic life of the locals by initiating a number of developmental programmes. Keeping this in agenda, it introduced the first Islamic bank in the year 1990, which worked for almost one decade but later got closed. Further to woo the people of Kargil in favour of IKMT, its functionaries established a marketing society in view of the social and economic condition of the region and day-to-day problems being faced by the people in getting their essential commodities from open market. The Trust also runs cooperative societies to provide market to the small apricot growers in this region and has worked in providing watershed management, and has been also paying some amount to poor widows. By the virtue of Islamic revolution in Iran, the Trust has been deeply involved in bringing modern education to many children by registering the Muthari Education Society, which runs fourteen schools under the banner of Muthari Public School in different parts of the district, where the main emphasis is laid on girls' education, which received appreciation by the previous traditional leaders here.

The first private school saw its establishment in the year 1984 under the name of 'Shaheed Muthary Public School'. This bold step was taken by a religious Ulema Sheikh Mohammad Hussain Zakri, who ignored the criticism of the people. The institution imparts Islamic studies right from primary education apart from the modern studies which has seen a large difference in the education system in this far- flung region of the country.

The Trust has been organising separate functions and events under their banner during Muharram; the followers of IKMT raise anti-American and anti-Israel slogans and are seen walking over the flags of Israel, which reflects their anger towards these countries. Zakri is the supremo of IKMT but the fact cannot be ruled out that



the vibrant force behind the trust is Ex-Chief Executive Councillor Asgar Ali Karbalie. This short looking man with curly hair has changed the present day scenario of the place by guiding the young generation to move forward and bring fame to this neglected city.

Asgar Ali Karbalie made his debut in politics in the year 2003, when he was elected as a councillor from LAHDC's Poyen constituency. Karbalie wanted to work on modern ideologies leaving behind the orthodox beliefs. He firmly believed that we must not confide ourselves to one party but join the others in the state for development of our district.

After eighteen months of active politics, he was elected the first Chief Executive Councillor of Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council, Kargil and remained on his hot position for three-and-a-half years. A good orator and motivator, he was not appreciated by a number of people because of his open speeches and modern thoughts. The year of 1997 resulted in clashes between Islamia School Kargil and Imam Khomeini Memorial Trust over sacred and ritual performances. The clashes occurred during the Ashura procession (observed to pay homage to the martyrdom of Imam Hussain).

The IKMT raised concern over the Zanjiri matam (Chain beating over chest) or the custom of self-flagellation with chains and blades, and tried to bring the concept of blood donation. The IKMT supporters were performing according to the position adopted by Ayatollah Syed Khomeini (Supreme Shia leader of Iran) in 1994. This issue created further friction amongst the two religious institutions as the Islamia School didn't support IKMT. It viewed blood flagellation as an expression of love and affection for the prophet and his family who was brutally assassinated.

Differences between Imam Khomeini Memorial Trust (IKMT) and Islamia School, Kargil also prevail over the issue of the local Jamia Masjid, which draws attention of police and the local administration alike. Security arrangements are tightened during the processions carried out in the town to foil any kind of clashes between the two groups, though the religious leaders ensure peace during the processions.

The modern mindset of IKMT focused even on involving social service activities among the younger generation to provide a helping hand towards the needy people. In this regard, the allied class consisting of doctors, educationists and engineers formed an organisation called 'Baqiryah Health Care and Research Centre' in December 2007. This opened doors to the poor and the needy as the volunteers provide free medical consultancy. Also, free medical camps are conducted along with spreading awareness on medical issues which generally the locals are deprived of. The institution has also been holding seminars and conferences on various health issues in collaboration with national and international organizations.

IKMT Kargil has strengthened the youth under the banner of Baseej-e-Imam with 5,000 youth as its members. The objective is to spread awareness amongst the youth regarding the contemporary development. Baseej-e-Imam organises free coaching camps where they impart tuitions free of cost to the needy and under-privileged students of Kargil when the schools shut down for winter break. Baseej-e-Imam is also involved in organising blood donation camps at various places in district. Besides this, it played a vital role during the natural calamities which occurred in the district. This organisation is also active in distribution of free clothes among the poor and the needy of the district.

The IKMT works for the upliftment of womenfolk in the district. A separate women's wing under the name of 'Zainabiya Women Welfare Society', which is registered with the government, having thousands of members enrolled. The objective is to spread awareness among the local women about the rights, education and other issues related to social, economic and political development in the district by the means of seminars, workshops and symposia on different issues both religious and social.

There is no doubt that the Iranian revolution and its adoption in Kargil has brought tremendous change as people have opened doors towards modernisation; otherwise they had remained in the cocoons or under the clergy of religious teachers who considered modernisation as a threat to Islam.

## CHAPTER 3

# The Ways of Life

### TRADITIONAL ATTIRE

The severity of the bone-piercing chill keeps the locals clad in layers of clothing. Modern clothing items such as jackets, coats and stylish protective footwear have flooded the markets in recent years, which have reduced the common use of traditional costumes leaving them for festive occasions only.

In Kargil one finds a variety of traditional clothes due to the presence of different tribes, races and sects of Muslims and Buddhists settled there. Though, in general, traditional costumes are more or less similar to each other, they have a unique identity and vary in some or the other way. One also finds a reflection of Kashmiri costumes here.

As far as dresses of Kargil are concerned, the male members usually wear a *Guncha* preferably of *pattu* in white colour with a *skerak* (waistband or *kamarband*) loosely bound around the waist. *Guncha*, a huge robe of thick woolen material, is the traditional as well as the national costume of Kargil. There are several kinds of *guncha* made of *pattu*, which is a homemade wool sheared off the local sheep. *Guncha* is worn with a *kamarband* (waist belt) which can be colourful or white depending on the choice of the individual. On many occasions, the men are also seen wearing *dorma*, a local trouser. Their heads are more often than not covered with woolen caps.

The newer generation is quite inclined towards pointed and fashionable shoes whereas the general public is comfortable with normal leather shoes. *Papoo* and *kratpas* are the traditional footwear

which are not very common these days but are found at times in few houses. The upper portion is made of wool while the sole is made of refined buffalo skin leather. *Papoo*s were also embroidered for special occasions. *Papoo*s are the common footwear for both men and women and they differ only in its design. Nubra in entire Ladakh is famous for *papoo* experts whereas Batalik and Chiktan are famous for these in the entire Kargil region.

### WOMEN'S ATTIRE

The women of Kargil also wear something similar to a *guncha*, which is called a *sulchak*. It is generally worn in shades of maroon and black with multi-coloured *pattus*. They wear ornaments like Toomar, Branghill and Kansir with this attire. A *kamarband* of *pattu* is also fastened around the waist. It is said that in the olden days, the rich people used to wear a silk or a brocade shirt underneath the *guncha* imported from Turkistan and Tibet. The females cover their heads with a *dupatta* or scarf from a very early age till her end. A long pair of pyjamas forming wrinkles above the ankle is made of three to four meters of fabric resembling Indian *churidar* pyjama. It is mostly worn by the elder women here as the younger generation finds it difficult to carry. This traditional pyjama is known as *Dorma*. Locals say that a lady having maximum wrinkles on her *dorma* would always feel proud in the olden days. Married and unmarried women are recognised by the colour of their salwar as black is the colour for the married whereas white signifies the unmarried girl. To save themselves from the severe winters, the women wear a goat skin called *sakpa* on their backs. *Sakpa* serves as a warmer but also protects the other clothing from getting dirty or soiled as the women often carry a basket of load on their backs.

There is a slight difference in the attire of the Dard and Garkhon Buddhist as the Dard men wear a *guncha*, which is short till the knees and is called *eaktaglous* while those from Garkhon wear ones that are slightly longer. The *gunchas*, which are also made from *pattu*, are multi-coloured and beautifully embroidered. To keep the legs warm, they wear woollen girdles called *sheli* and to safeguard their feet from

chill blains, they generally wear *pela*, which is a combination of the local wool *pattu* and leather. Heads are covered with round caps called *kho* which are beautifully decorated with the locally grown flower *monchotto*, unique to the identity of the Aryans. Locals pluck these flowers in the month of September and stitch it to their caps by October end. According to the tradition, these flowers are not worn during mourning.

The sharp featured Buddhist Dard females are tall when compared to other women in the area. Their hair is generally long but thin and is plaited in numbers like nomadic tribe women. These women wear a multi-coloured embroidered short coat slightly below the knees resembling a *phiran*, a Kashmiri attire. The beauty of the coat is enhanced by its colourful brim, which is embroidered in typical Kashmiri pattern with multi-coloured woollen threads. The most unique and intricately decorated part of a woman's costume is the *kho* or the cap which is well decorated with flowers along with a replica of traditional jewellery. The Buddhist Dardi women look really attractive with the exclusive triangular-shaped *kho*. One also finds loads of needles, corals, shells and turquoise stitched neatly over the caps, which lend a very colourful getup.

The women of this community also wear a *tompho*, which is exactly similar to the *sakpa* and is used to protect them from severe chill as also to safeguard the clothing from getting soiled from the load they carry on their back in their baskets.

The Purgi Buddhists wear the *guncha* just like the Shia Muslims of Kargil though it is a little longer. The girdles are as similar but the caps worn by the Buddhists are quilted skull cap made of sheep skin.

The Purgi Buddhist women wear a multi-coloured jacket with black as the basic shade. The jacket is worn long and generally falls below the knees. The footwear worn is called *paboo* or *paboor* and is worn by both men and women alike. It is made out of goat skin and is highlighted with rich embroidery.

The Balti man can easily be identified in the crowd from his *nating*, which is the Balti name for cap. The Baltis of Hardass wear round-shaped caps, made of local woollen *pattu*. It is usually white

in colour. The brim of the *Nating* is turned outward whereas the top part is arrow shaped.

The Balti women wear a dress similar to the Kashmiri *phiran* over a loose *salwar* called *firaq*. It is important for the *phiran* to be black in colour. The women also cover their heads with scarves till the forehead, hiding their hair.

The Sunni Dards of Drass also have their own traditional dress. The menfolk wear medium-sized woollen *gunchas* over a pair of woollen trousers called *Dorms*. There is no traditional cap for the Drass Dards but they buy whatever is available in the market. They are sometime even spotted wearing turbans.

The females of this cold region wear a long and wide *guncha* with a woollen *kamarband* called *kuksi*. The *guncha* has two big pockets in the right and left side to store dry fruits, which they keep munching through the day.

Qaba and Aba are the two main costumes of Aghas and Sheikhs who wear *thot* or *pasho* as their head gear or turban along with them. The successful completion of their study in theology entitles them the title of Sheikh from their respective religious institution. To distinguish between the two, the Aghas wear a black *thot* or *pasho*, which is a sign of their spiritual chain being related to Sadats or Sayads. The Sheikhs, on the other hand, wear white turbans reflecting their higher educational degrees from Iran or Iraq. The dress of the Aghas and Sheikhs is almost similar but with one shade of distinction that, in case of Aghas, wearing black turban *thot* or *pasho* reflects their genealogical chain being related to the Sadats or Sayads and the Sheikhs wear white turbans simply because they are highly educated and degree holders from Islamic Maktabs of Iran or Iraq. It was authoritatively learnt in the course of my field study that the turban of Sadat till the day of Islamic-i-Husain used to be green in colour. It was subsequently changed to black in order to commemorate the event of Karbala in 61 Hijra era, in which the martyrdom of Hazrat Imam-i-Husain took place. It was changed to black because the prevalent Arab custom was to wear the black clothing for 40 days to mourn for the deceased of their kith and kin.

Since it was a great tragedy, Sayed later continued to wear black cloth.

According to the Sheikhs of Kargil, their dress was proposed and chosen by Prophet Mohammed for all Islamic preachers and Ulemas. The main purpose of the Prophet for suggesting this dress for religious preachers was that strangers or unknown people would easily distinguish them by their dress. Secondly, the Sheikhs of Kargil opined that the additional reason for the religious apparel is that the common people would come to them for religious guidance to pay proper homage to them.

On the other hand, the Buddhist monks, lamas and nuns wear a red or yellow gown over which is a large size blanket or a sheet covering them from top to bottom. In general they always carry a sling bag across their chest, which is used primarily to carry their spiritual books. Both nuns and the lamas keep their heads shaved, as it is a religious practice.

### BIRTH CEREMONIES

The birth ceremonies are quite similar in each Muslim group and vary with some minute differences. The Kargallies send the expectant mother to her parental home for confinement whereas the Baltis make her stay in her husband's home.

A pregnant lady is not allowed to do any heavy work and is not generally allowed to move out in the dark, especially near the graveyards. She is also not allowed to attend mourning ceremonies to avoid negative effect on the growth of baby.

Like any other remote part of the country, here also the deliveries were conducted by mid-wive or by the elder lady in the home but now women are going to hospitals for safer child birth.

There are celebrations in the family when the baby is born and soon the message is spread in the village. Soon the baby is given hot water bath in a closed warm room. The baby is wrapped in old clothes and to protect it from severe cold, he or she is cuddled in a locally made sleeping bag called 'Thullu.' It is made of sheep skin which is very warm. There are babies' belongings which come from

the father and are known as 'Pailung.' A priest or elder in the family whispers 'Azan' into the right ear and in the left 'Takbir' or 'Iqama.'

The maternal grandmother arranges a basket or 'Chapo' filled with eight kilograms of sattu, and similar quantity of butter with some bread. The basket is marked with a sign of arrow in the right side in case of a baby boy and left side in case of a baby girl.

Fifteen days later, the mother and the new born are moved to father's place, where a small ceremony called 'Mingtask' or Botoni/Botoningv (naming ceremony) is observed. Mingtask is a very grand function. A sheep is slaughtered and offered for sacrifice (Kurbani) in the name of the new born. Half of the sheep is preserved for the new born's mother. It is very strange that the new born's parents are not supposed to eat the flesh of the sacrificed goat. The name of the child is acknowledged only once the sacrifice is over.

The mother is allowed to take bath only after 40 days of her delivery, which is also celebrated.

### MARRIAGE CUSTOMS/RITUALS

Islam does not believe in celibacy. The Prophet of Islam has said, "Marriage is my *sunnah*," which is a recommended act of the Prophet, "and whoever does not follow my *sunnah* is not my follower." Islamic law allows both monogamy and polygamy under which a man can keep four wives at one time.

In Kargil, monogamy is the preferred practice. However, there are few instances of polygamy also, though this practice is not encouraged in this region. *Muta* or temporary marriage is another marriage which is practiced in Kargil but the locals are not open to sharing its details with outsiders.

*Muta* is a temporary or breakable marriage. It is pronounced as Mutta, Muta'h or Muta'ah. There is some kind of controversy over the permission of *Muta* among the Shias and the Sunnis. Muslims have agreed unanimously on the legitimacy of *Muta*. Many Haidths showed that it was being contracted during the Prophet's era as well as during Abi Bakir's and Omar's era. Later on, an opinion of the juristic sects, other than the Shiites sect, considered it illegitimate (*haram*). However, the Shiites still consider it legitimate (*halal*).



Under this practice of marriage, a contract is signed at the wedding ceremony which only applies for a fixed time—varying from one day to a few years. In Kargil, *muta* has been prevalent in the Baltis and the Purkys only.

There is no system of divorce in a *muta* marriage as one has to stay married till the expiry of the term in the contract. *Muta* marriage is different than other marriages, as a woman whose marriage was consummated must finish her *Iddat* (period in which the woman cannot remarry) in case she wants to marry another person. The *Iddat* finishes in two menstrual periods to ascertain that she has not conceived. Therefore, she is legitimately prohibited to remarry before the termination of *Iddat*. Whereas, if her marriage was not consummated (sexually), she will not observe an *Iddat* and she may conclude a marriage contract with another man immediately. The husband too is not obliged to support her with money, unless the wife has stipulated this condition in the contract. Even in case of death during the contract period, no one can inherit the other's property. On the other hand, if the husband wishes to leave his wife before the termination of the specific period, he can donate her the time period and tell her that "I donate you the time period." Thereafter, she will be separated from him and the contract will be terminated. However, if the husband wishes to renew the contract after it is terminated, the *Iddat* will not be imposed on the wife and she just has to state the verbal form of the contract in order to be remarried.

The children from a *Muta* marriage have the same position and rights as that of permanent marriage. They inherit their parent's property and command the same position as their other siblings. All the rules of *Mahramiyat* (religious formality) apply to them.

Polyandry is one unique type of marriage which once used to be practiced among the Buddhists of Ladakh and Kargil and is likely to be still practiced in the remote areas of Zaskar. These facts have left many tourists astonished. There are two types of polyandry—the fraternal and non-fraternal types. In fraternal polyandry, two or more brothers are married to the same woman while in the non-

fraternal polyandry, the husbands are not related in any way. This practice is likely to still be observed by the Buddhists in Zanskar as the fraternal type of polyandry was being followed in earlier days.

Polyandry serves at least two purposes. Firstly, it is a ritual which is used for the preservation and continuity of property, particularly land because if farms were divided into parts upon the death of the father, soon the farms would become very small in size and the economy of the family would go down. Under polyandry, this does not occur as each brother has economic security and a stake in the family farm and household. The second reason was due to the economic factor. Marriage usually entails considerable expense and the poor in certain societies find it economical for brothers to share a wife. In the present day, due to exposure and influence of the outer world, the polyandry graph has gone down considerably as in 1999 around a quarter of Zanskar still practiced polyandry.

As far as the marriage customs in the Muslim community are concerned, the marriage proposal is extended by the boy's family and it is the *Halpa*, a middle man, who takes the proposal to the girl's family. The bride's most attractive item is her *dahoon* or *duppata*, which is like a stole but is more elaborately decorated. Her friends dress her up while singing traditional songs which convey to her about the new journey of life she is about to undertake. The elders feel this mentally prepares her to accept her new life in a different set up, leaving behind the place where she grew up.

The cap worn by the girl is made of home-spun *pattu*. Under the cap lies a *Kanseer*, which is a beautifully designed and elaborately crafted silver plate with long hanging chains and balls. The reflection of shining silver balls enhances the beauty of the bride. The gold and silver earrings or *snacha* embedded with turquoise studs or *feroza* also further enhance the beauty. Large silver ornaments known as *brangshil* are hung on both sides of the chest over the *sulchak* or the *goncha*. A traditional locket made of silver and gold and known as *sketcha* is also an important accessory of the bride, which is decked up with *feroza* and beads. The red colour *beru*, a red colour stone, in the locket adds striking beauty to it. The

bangles, known as *hrgudu*, are simple and plain which are made in gold and silver and beautifully complement the *feroza* finger rings known as *serudups*.

With the influence of Buddhist culture in the last ten years, the brides now a days are seen wearing a shirt under the *sulchak* or *goncha*, which is quite similar to the Tibetan *onchu* (shirt worn under their traditional attire *chuba*) to add beauty to the attire.

There is a waist belt tied around the *guncha* called *Skiraqs*, which is made up of *pattu* and is decorated with embroidery that must possess three shades of Tikma dyes which are the Tibetan dyes.

The most unique thing of the entire attire is the fully wrinkled *salwar* or *Hrduchaqs* measuring three to three-and-a-half meters. In earlier days, it used to be made of *pattu* but today these *dormas* have fashionable looks in velvet, silk and other shiny and silky material.

Due to religious restriction the women are not allowed to apply makeup but with little relaxation setting in these days, a few brides do get dressed at the sole beauty parlour at Kargil.

A bride is incomplete without her traditional footwear, *pappu*. *Pappus* are beautifully embroidered with colourful threads.

Buddhist, Purki and Dard women and men are very much inclined towards ornaments and are usually found decked up. The Brokpa female folk of Darchik and nearby stand out of the world with their ornaments beginning from their traditional headgear. The headgear is highly decorated with beads, steel needles, buttons, coins and other locally available unique looking jewellery. Their neck is tightly wrapped around with silver necklaces or 'mowlen kabaou' with the tinch of turquoise. Use of turquoise is more dominant in any jewellery. A locally grown flower 'Shoqlo mintok' is a must along with other wild flowers.

The men of this tribe also are fond of wearing ornaments whereas the Muslim males don't wear any jewellery. They have long hair and tie them in multi plaits falling till their shoulders and at times below their hips. They compliment themselves with thick broad silver necklaces, precious stones, rings, knife, plastic buttons hanging over their ears and a flower.

The Zanskari women wear a heavy woollen headgear which protects her ears from severe chill. The married women's headgear is heavily embedded with turquoise stone and is called *Perak*.

The Buddhist Purki women wear her all-time favourite necklaces embedded with turquoise, cornelian and monga stones.

### GROOM'S ATTIRE

The Muslim grooms wear white *thoth* or the turban. The shade of white is a must. *Aguncha* made of *patoo* with five buttons and a single pocket is the style of it. The attire is complete with a loose trouser which is home spun. The broad shoulders are covered by a woollen shawl, which is used as an identification mark for a groom. He is ready to step out with the pair of *Pappu*.

In ancient times, the locals used to wear a footwear called *Kartpa* made of goat skin. Though a rough finished footwear but it was comfortable, though it is rarely worn by the Aryan tribe now. The women *kratpas* used to be colourful whereas men used to have embroidery.

The marriage proposal is always extended by the boy's family. It is the Halpa, the mediator, who takes ahead the marriage proposal and once the alliance is confirmed, the boy's father along with halpa visits the girl's parents. Both are welcomed by the parents and the relatives of the girl's side. On arrival, a grand welcome is extended to them and the boy's father is offered *Tifings*, a locally baked bread and as customary it is offered in a copper plate. Later, he is taken for dinner where, after finishing his meals, he keeps some money in the plate. The culture of sweets is missing here as the boy's father carries a local bread called *markhur*, which is offered to the girl's father and shared with all the relatives present at the girl's place during the ceremony of 'Sail.' Sail binds the two families in a relationship.

Halpa hold a very important position from the beginning to the end of a marriage ceremony. Later, the happiness between the families of girls and boys is shared by 'Cha Kherba', which is sent to the girl's side through the halpa. While observing this ceremony, items such as butter, tea leaves of *gur gur* tea and local bread *markhur* are sent.

Now the families gear up for the big day celebration. There are family gathering is joined by the village members too. 'Dawats', special meal get together, are thrown to kick off the festive mood of marriage.

The first ceremony is the heena ceremony known as *SENMORSI* or *Mehandi raat* (night), which is a major ceremony in both the families. Respective places are full with relatives and friends. The boys send across henna, jewellery and some clothes for the bride or *dulhan*. Henna design is carved on the bride's palms and on two fingers of the groom.

It is fun and frolic time for both the families. The friends are there to brighten the atmosphere with their songs and dance. Later in the evening, the friends take bride and groom in neighbouring houses where they enjoy singing songs and teasing the bride and groom respectively. Both the ceremonies are carried simultaneously the same night but at their respective places.

The family head or the rNaingo from the girl's family visits the boy's family along with some relatives. There are few demands put across to the boy's family by the rNaingo. First, he asks for a 'PHERBA,' a demand for a quilt, which must be enough to cover the entire sky. Talks in between are carried out to cut short the demands. He puts across an irritating demand of a 'nuope raskais', which means a goat with lots of conditions such as the sheep must have good flesh with good weight and a wrestler shouldn't be able to pick it up easily.

On the third day or the day of wedding, religious ceremonies are conducted at the girl's and boy's side in the presence of a Moulvi or the priest. The bride and the groom are made to sit at a special place in their individual homes, 'musnad.' Elders offer gifts and blessing to them.

Early morning by eight, 'Qasidas' are recited. On the other side the prayers are recited by the ulema at the time of groom dressing. The uelma prays for the longevity of the couple and wishes them a happy married life. The groom's parents come to their son and present him a 'khatak,' scarf and ask him to proceed to the bride's home.

Smartly dressed in *Guncha*, the groom rides the horse. The procession follows the groom to the bride's home. There is a tradition of making a young boy sit with the groom as his caretaker throughout the journey to the bride's home. This honour is generally given to the groom's nephew (sister's son) or any other cousin. He carries along two arrows wrapped in a white cloth. A very special reception, care and attention is given to him, irrespective of his age.

There are several tea halts on the way to the bride's home. The relatives and groom's close friends offer tea and snack to the groom and the people accompanying him. Locals say this custom was initiated because in the earlier days there were no vehicles and people used to cover long distances on foot. So just to relax them, this custom was initiated. Krashispa and ajang (groom's maternal uncle) offer some cash reward in lieu of the arrangement. The same practice is followed by the girl's relatives and friends when she is on her way to her new home.

On arrival at the bride's home, the groom is stopped at the gate by his friends and other people who are invited guests. They stop the groom by placing Maqber (*a long wooden plank*) at the entrance demanding the groom's uncle for token in form of money. After the groom's ajang has given them the money, they are allowed to enter. Another stoppage is 'Nenber' (close relatives of the bride) who also demand for money. A negotiation takes between the groups to make it interesting and interactive. After ajang has given some amount initially, the groom, Krashispa and the relatives are escorted to the 'Nangecha' or 'labrang,' where the marriage ceremony is to be solemnised. Tea and snacks are offered to the groom and his relatives.

Nikah (marriage) is read out and the priest gives certain guidelines to both and tells them about the importance and meaning of Nikah. To safeguard the future of bride in case of marriage failure, an amount of money is decided by the bride keeping in mind the economic status of the groom. Finally, the priest takes consent one by one from bride and groom where he asks their permission to

finally announce them as husband and wife. 'Kabul hai, Kabul hai, Kabul hai' is said thrice by both. Finally, a document is signed by both of them and a thumb impression in case of illiterate couple, and then they are announced husband and wife. The families greet each other.

The groom is greeted with 'Phey,' in a copper plate. Here also ajang pays the money. Now the groom is directed to the kitchen where the bride's mother is waiting for him impatiently. He hands over 'Gosgosi rus', almost three meter of white fabric, along with some amount. This fabric is distributed among the children of the family later on.

The groom at last made to sit comfortably on a stage where he is attended well by his relatives. Traditional folk songs and dances are performed by friends and relatives. The groom is served papa with marzan. Krashispa is served with 'phishak,' a goat leg as a special meal to him. A marriage is incomplete without apricot juice.

On the occasion of the wedding there is a special kind of butter called 'mar,' which is hard like a rock and the girl's relatives ask the boy's party to cut it with the finger; it is nothing else but a fun game.

The bride seeks permission from her parents and near and dear ones. Finally she holds the 'Zgothem' (the pillars of the exit door) for some time to show that her heart is sinking while stepping out from her home. Finally, she steps out to lead a new life with her life partner. To make her comfortable in the new house, the bride is accompanied by her 'Neney' (father's sister) to her husband's home along with her maternal uncle and few relatives and friends. The Neney stays on for a few days with the bride.

On her arrival at the door of the groom's home, she is asked to sit on a chair and dip her feet in a tub. This custom is called 'Kangma Khrouchus.'

Now this supple bride is welcomed to this new house and moved to a stage. A custom of washing hand is carried out before the dinner called 'Lakchoo.' It is very interesting that the bride throws tantrums and does not agree to wash hands. She demands for a gold spoon. On seeing this, the boy's family members ask the 'Neney' to

intervene and make her agree to wash hands. After some time, the boy's party bribe the Neney with some token amount and that is the time when the bride stops the tantrums and comes on terms.

The day after the Nikah is the talent show of the bride as she is introduced to the kitchen and asked to make a roti, 'chapatti' for the guests. It is to make her feel that now she is part of this family. After her test she and her beloved are asked to remove their caps on a tray in which there are threads inside the caps. This is called 'Balthurfaba'. Next, sweets are distributed among the gathering.

On the next day of Nikah comes 'Bosmi' or the messenger. He comes from the bride's home with an invitation for 'Sulam' (party). The bride and groom along with six to eight members visit the bride's family and are given a very special dawat in which a variety of dishes are prepared. They all stay for the night and leave the next morning. This system is repeated with the girl's parents too but here the number of relatives is double. The girl's family must carry a basket full of *Assok* (local fried bread), Markhur, etc.

After almost a month of Nikah, comes the 'Khangsgoo,' where the bride and groom along with the family members are invited for a few days to stay. When the family leaves, the bride remains with her parents for a few days. After a month comes 'Amagron,' where the bride's mother-in-law is invited for a few days to stay with the bride's family. This is also repeated with the girl's mother.

There is no mediator in the Buddhist marriage proposals as in the Muslim's. The first step is led by the boy's parents who initiate the proposal to the girl's family. Once the alliance is confirmed between the two families, the boy's parents offer the fermented drink of barley 'chang' and money to the would-be bride's parents. Like the Hindu rituals, the Buddhists also strongly believe in astrology and don't decide on the wedding day till the time the consent is not received from the astrologer. The astrologer is provided with the date, time of birth and the names of the girl and the boy. In case some trouble shoot up, the astrologer guides them to perform some religious ceremonies or puja to overcome the problem and continue with the marriage.



Once the marriage date is confirmed, the *ajang* (groom's maternal uncle) visits the girl's parents with a pot of *chang*, butter, money and a scarf or the 'khatak'. On this day the parents call over the relatives and disclose the alliance informing them about the proposed date of wedding and seek their consent at a function called 'khamithal.' This is the first function in the girl's home followed by Buddhists living in Zanskar. The Buddhists of Wakha observe it a little differently. In this function they declare the names of the men or the relatives who are going to take the marriage party to the bride's home to bring her along. They are known as 'Neuchar.' Among the Buddhists, the groom does not go to bring the bride; it is the team of Neuchar that goes minus the womenfolk. The astrologer informs of a time which is believed to be auspicious and they leave for the bride's home on that particular time.

In such places, the families and the villagers are closely knit and participate in function as members of the family. The village women come together with burning 'shukpa' called 'fokechar' and give them several pots filled with *chang* to be offered to the bride's father. Like in Muslims, the relatives of the groom on the way offer *chang* and snacks to them as the *ajang* or the maternal uncle pays them money in return.

On the arrival at the bride's home, a grand welcome is extended by the relatives, who receive them with blazing 'fokechar'. The bride's father offers *chang* to the boy's party which they have to finish before they step ahead. The musicians beat the traditional drums, though in the recent years Bollywood music and songs have made their entry.

In case the main door to the bride's home is found closed, the *ajang* pays the money and enters the house. It is a great festivity in the girl's home; dancing and singing are observed in full swing. The Neuchar now enter the kitchen and offer 'teshespa' in a brass plate filled with eatables like meat, local breads and *sattu* or barley powder. A *patoo* or home spun is also handed over to the bride's mother.

The girl's and boy's family rejoice the moment with drinks and food. The bride does not sit in her home and the Neuchar go to fetch her with full traditional fervour from her relatives or friends who

approach them to get her dressed in the bridal attire. After paying some money, the bride is brought to her home where on an auspicious time she enters the kitchen of her parents' home and from where she steps out for the groom's home. Dressed in her 'perak,' the studded headgear, she adorns her neck and ears with ornaments made of green stone, corals, silver and pearls. In the earlier days, the jewellery was bought from Tibet whereas now a days Leh is the market for it. Before she leaves, a small ceremony is performed where the friends, relatives and villagers come and give her the gifts and blessings.

The bride leaves her home with her 'annie' or aunt along with her *ajang* with the *Neuchar* or the groom's party. On her arrival the monks perform a mask dance and the head monk breaks a pot before she approaches the entrance of the groom's home. The bride is received by her mother-in-law who offers her 'Dhuru' (paste of powdered barley and saturated fat). She greets her with 'gorus,' a piece of cloth and gifts. Her mother-in-law gives her blessings to have a happy married life. The bride greets everyone in the groom's family by saying 'julley' to all.

Few days later there are exchanges of meals between the girl's and boy's family quite similar to the Muslims of the area. It is pertinent to mention here that though the Buddhists in the region follow the same traditions but at certain places rituals vary with minor differences, as seen among the Buddhists of Darchik.

## FESTIVALS

### *Muslim Festivals*

**Muharram:** Muharram is observed as a month of remembrance in honour that is often considered identical with the event of Ashura or Ashoora. It is well known because of historical significance and mourning for the martyrdom of Hussein ibn Ali, the grandson of Muhammad. Both Shias and Sunnis observe this, but with a difference.

Shias begin mourning from the very first day and strongly go with the same till Ashoora. In between this period several

processions are brought out from several villages to the town. Religious meetings are held every evening at Imambaras. Many Shias put black cloth at their business establishments to mark sadness. The women don't apply any cosmetics and in the earlier days even combing of hair was not done.

Kargil turns into full mourning on the 10th day of Muharrum, which is observed as Ashoora. Ashoora, which literally means the "Tenth" in Arabic, refers to the tenth day of Muharram. On this day processions are out from every nook and corner. The streets are full of people observing chest beating and reciting 'Nuhas'. The procession carries Zuljina and Taboot. The procession ends at the Qatilgah.

The 14th day of Muharrum is observed as the death anniversary of Jenab-e-Fatima, daughter of Prophet Mohammad and wife of Hazrat Ali.

Wearing black outfits, the mourners come out and observe Arba'in, also known as Chehlum (the 40th day after the martyrdom of Hazrat Imam Hussain). They carry out mid-day prayers after 'Nawha Khwani' and 'matam' (beating chests).

**Meelad Sharief:** The 7th day of Rabi-ul-Awl is celebrated as Prophet Mohammad's birthday. There is festive mood; people read the holy book *Quran* and offer special prayers. Special sweet is made. Halwa, made of semolina or sooji, is prepared and shared among friends and relatives.

**Shabe Miraj:** It falls on the 26th day of seventh month of the Islamic month 'Rajjab.' Religious prayers are carried out on this happy occasion.

**Shabe-Barat:** Balti, Dards and Purky all come together dressed in their new clothes and wish each other. There is excitement among children, especially who look forward to this festival. Homes, Imambaras and mosques are all decorated with lights and candles. Devotees spend the night in mosques praying and meditating.

**Ramzan:** Ramzan is the 9th month of the Islamic calendar, which lasts 29 or 30 days. Muslims observe fasts and abstain from

eating, drinking and smoking. The days and nights are spent in praying and doing good deeds.

**Id-ul-Fitr:** Eid-ul-Fitr or the 'festival of breaking fast' is the most celebrated of all Muslim festivals. The term 'Eid' has been derived from the Arabic word 'oud', which means 'the return' and, hence, signifies the return of the festival each year. It is celebrated after the long fasting month of Ramadan (the ninth month of the Islamic calendar), on the first day of the Shawwal month of the Hijri year (Islamic calendar). Legend says that the *Qur'an* was revealed to Prophet Mohammed in the last 10 days of Ramadan. Both Sunni Dards and Purky and Balti Shias take their breakfast and distribute alms generously, among the poor and needy.

**Id-ul-Zuha or Id-i-Qurban:** This festival is celebrated on the 10th of the month of Zila-hijja, the twelfth month of the Muslim calendar. This festival is celebrated in the same way as that of the Id-ul-Fitr, the only difference being that the sacrifice of animals is offered in place of alms and charity.

**Nauroz:** The origin of this festival can be traced to the 'Naurozal-Fres' of Iran. Locals in Kargil enjoy this festival like any other festival.

**Id-Ghadir:** This festival is observed on the 18th of Zil-hijja (Islamic calendar month). According to Shia belief, it was on this day that Prophet Mohammad appointed Hazrat Ali as his successor at a place called Ghadir Khum, where he reached after performing his sent-off pilgrimage to Mecca. Since then the Shias claim Hazrat Ali as the real successor to the Imamat and Khilafat of the Muslim community.

### SEASONAL FESTIVALS

**Mamni:** It is celebrated on 21st January every year. Mamni means cold. This festival is considered auspicious and is celebrated to say good bye to the winter months. People get together and share the festivity with friends and relatives. Children have fun and frolic as they enjoy playing in the open.

The locals believe that during this, the chill immerses in the river and stays there for seven days. After this, the chill comes back at the

*lukarchey* (under the door) and once the locals put their *khotuor* (chulah), it finally goes back to the river for a few months. The locals get together at *Changra* (place where all the people get together).

**Strupla:** It is a festival of farmers to welcome the crop they had sowed. It is celebrated for three days and special invitations are extended to the newly wed couples. Locals dress up in new clothes.

**Snola.** The festival of flowers is to welcome the blooming season. It celebrated by Buddhists for two days.

### BUDDHIST FESTIVALS

The Buddhist festivals are Snola, Buddha Purnima, Losar, Strupla, Mendok Ltatmo and Bonana. However, the Buddhists mainly celebrate Losar. Losar is celebrated generally a week before the Gregorian New Year. The Buddhists celebrate this with great fervour and enthusiasm. Despite snow during the festival, the Buddhists come out on the streets swinging *Metho* or huge-sized fire balls or torches. This is an amazing scene to catch. Though the large congregation is seen at Leh the existing and distributed Buddhist population in Kargil also observe the festival on the same lines. Reciting prayers they move ahead. The Buddhists and others through the town's main monastery to pray and pay obeisance to Maitreya Buddha or the future Buddha. Losar is a Tibetan word for New Year, where 'Lo' means year and 'sar' means new.

"The festival of Losar starts from the 15th of the Hindu month Kartik. Lord Chakra Cambhava was born on the 15th of Kartik month. Moreover, on the same day Vinia was also introduced in Tibet. On this day, people visit the temples and pray for world peace," says Tshering Norbu Martey, a Buddhist scholar.

The Losar festival (also known as Halda in Lahuli) is celebrated between the months of January and February. The Lamas decide the date of celebration. It has the same significance as the Diwali festival of Hindus, but is celebrated in Tibetan fashion.

At the start of the festival, two or three persons from every household come holding burning incense. The burning sticks are then piled into a bonfire. The people then pray to Shiskar Apa, the goddess of wealth, in the Buddhist religion.

Buddhists celebrate Losar with gaiety and fervour, which include illuminations, drinking, dancing, singing and general merry making.

The rituals are conducted for weeks together where complicated prayer ceremonies are conducted to felicitate the village ancestors and to oust evil and negative forces from the villages.

They believe celebrating Losar will rid them of sufferings and miseries of the past years and bring happiness and prosperity in their lives in the coming years.

The festivities recreate the rich cultural heritage of Ladakh, popularly known as the roof of the world, situated at a height of 12,000 feet to 4,000 feet.

### FUNERAL RITES

Death is a very painful and emotional time for anyone, as the person who has taken his last breath is never going to be back. However, this concept does not prevail among the Buddhists who believe in re-birth.

When a Muslim is nearing death, the people who are close in relation and to his heart are called upon to give command reminders of God's mercy and forgiveness but in the contemporary world such bonding has reduced due to various reasons, such as nuclear families, distances and changing lifestyles. However, Kargil denizens have been able to preserve this by keeping the influence of contemporary world at bay.

The villagers, neighbours and friends take turns to sit near the sick person, who counts his last days, and recite verses from the Holy *Quran*, give physical comfort, and encourage the dying one to recite words of remembrance and prayer. Among Muslims, crying is permitted whereas shouting and screaming are generally not appreciated. When Prophet Mohammad's own son died, he said, "The eyes shed tears and the heart is grieved, but we will not say anything except which pleases our Lord."

Once a person of Muslim faith has breathed his last, he is made to rest with his eyes closed and his body is laid down facing north. A

clean cloth preferably white in colour is spread over the dead. A messenger is sent to the village to inform about the death. Soon the greaved house is taken care of by the villagers and the relatives. Like in any other religion, bath is given to the dead body. The priest carries out the prayers and sprinkle some fragmented water over the dead. The body of the male is shrouded in three pieces of cloth, which include *thot* (turban), *pheran* (for upper body) and *loongi* for lower body. The woman's body is covered in five pieces starting from her scarf to toes.

The deceased is then transported to the funeral site on two small green branches of poplar trees or any greens. The body is then wrapped in a piece of *latha* and cotton thread, and the greens are kept one each in both fists or underarms. This ritual is called 'jarajathpn' or wet tree. The significance for keeping the green branches is that as the greens dry, the sins which he or she had committed will wash away. The prayers are recited which are commonly held outdoors, in a courtyard or public square but not inside the mosque.

The community gathers and the priest stands in front of the deceased, facing away from the worshippers. The funeral prayer is similar in structure to the five daily prayers, with a few variations, and there is no bowing or prostration, and the entire prayer is said silently but for a few words.

Before taking the dead body for the final journey, it is placed in a wooden coffin locally called 'rurgam', measuring 3' x 7', and is carried by four to six male relatives to the nearest mosque. Women don't accompany the funeral procession. All the way till the procession does not reach the graveyard, they keep reciting religious verses from the holy book.

The grave is dug by the villagers or relatives. A few men get inside the dug up grave and the coffin is then lowered by the people above. All those present during the burial pour some mud into the grave. The Shias of Kargil observe a ceremony in respect of an adult dead body before it is laid to rest.

There is no food cooked in the home of the dead for the first three days and the villagers take care of this by supplying food to them. Even the people who come over for condolence take care of this. On the fourth day of the death, friends, relatives and neighbours assemble at the graveyard and collectively recite verses from the *Quran* and offer prayers. They are served a grand feast on their return by the family of the deceased and this is basically to thank for all the support extended to them during this period.

The Buddhists, in most of the cases, do not cremate the dead immediately and keep the body for long periods, which varies from one day to fifteen or even month at times. During the research survey, I came to the conclusion that the death rituals and customs varied every 10 kilometers as in Khalste the dead was cremated the same day.

Buddhists strongly believe in re-birth. The death ceremonies in every case are carried out by the Lamas or the monks and the astrologers. The astrologer takes out the auspicious time for the cremation of the body. The dead body is covered with a white cloth with the significance of preventing the soul for the correct time to leave or escape. Nobody is allowed to touch the body till the time the lama and the 'phasphuns' (group of several people who follow the same deity and hold common oven or spur/Khang or the oven for cremation) are through with the rights of the ceremony. A butter lamp along with food and drink is kept in front of the deceased to please the deceased and is kept there till the time the body is not moved out from there. Some Buddhists cremate the body in lying position and some in the sitting position.



## CHAPTER 4

# Life Style and Home Patterns

### FOOD HABITS

Kargil cuisine has been influenced by various groups and cultures interacting in Ladakh and its neighboring countries and states. One finds diversity in the regional cuisines over here. The locals make the best out of the sources available in the region. Meat of yak, sheep, goat and hen is commonly used here as it is the demand of this cold region. The people of Kargil largely being Shias abstain from taking cooked items from non-Muslims. However, there is no restriction on dry fruits.

The local kitchens are very beautifully laid with utensils made of copper, aluminium and clay, which still preserve the ethnic style of golden age though now a days one finds glass crockery in many houses. Tibetan big-sized flasks are largely found in every house and are very handy for preserving water. The cooking takes place generally in traditional vessels. A small size wooden cupboard with a mesh in front is always there in kitchens, which stores milk, butter and all other cooked material.

Sattu (roasted barley powder) is a delicacy of the locals. The grains of barley are roasted and crushed into powder. This powder has always proved useful and the locals carry it along whenever they travel. In the most recent war of 1999, when the locals fled from their homes under heavy artillery firing by Pakistan Army, they carried sattu along with them for their survival.

Sattu is boiled in water till it loses most of its moisture and is enjoyed with ghee (animal fat), apricot oil, cabbage or turnip broth. It is also enjoyed with local salt tea. This preparation is called “Khulaq” or “Femar” locally.

Thick, round wheat chappati or taki is served along with home-churned sparkling white butter called mar. Every house has tea ready all the time. Gurgur chai (salt and butter tea) is an excellent hot beverage consumed by the locals throughout Ladakh and Kashmir. It is prepared from special tea leaves called Suratee tea.

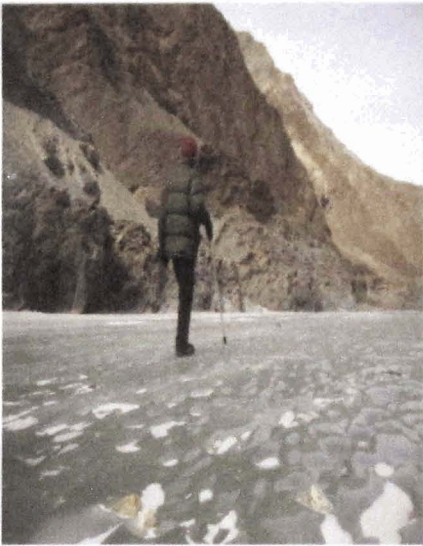
Its preparation is different from the general tea. The tea leaves are boiled for hours along with sodium bicarbonate to get the pinkish kind of colour. Traditionally, it is churned in a cylindrical vessel called gurgur and is mixed with butter and milk for quite a long time, before serving. It is found in every house at any hour of the time in a flask as they keep sipping it off and on. Locals believe that it helps in digesting the food.

Papa is another delicacy very common here. It is the combination of barley sattu, prepared and consumed in a similar manner as the thukpa and is enjoyed mainly with apricot oil. Copper utensils are widely brought in use because of their ability to heat faster as compared to other material.

MokMok is a dish prepared during special ceremonies. It is composed of minced meat, boiled potatoes, mixed dry spices, onion and ginger coated in wheat or barley chapattis to form rolls, which are then steamed in a special round aluminum container having three to four sections. Each section has holes for proper steaming and it is called 'Moktu'.

Cold beverage of the Suru valley is Fating Chu, a thick delicious juice obtained by boiling dried apricots in hot water for a long period of time. To make it sweet, sugar is added at times. This juice is served during festive occasions and is a great treat on weddings. The locals enjoy the delicacies the most on special occasions.

Sabkhur is a delicacy which has a sweet touch and is small and round like a local bread or kulcha (baked bread). It is prepared from barley, which is soaked in water for almost fifteen days and put in the scorching sun. Later, it is churned in powder form and mixed with wheat flour. As mentioned earlier, thick but small rolls are baked on the fire or griddle. It tastes best when served with pure ghee (saturated fat). Sabkhur is a special and rich delicacy of the poor



*Frozen river Zanskar.*



*Iqbal Bridge over Suru River (1954, named after L/Nk Iqbal Singh).*



*A woman wearing Sakpa.*



*Buddhist women in traditional attire with headgear Perak.*



*Polo ground in village Goshan Shagran.*



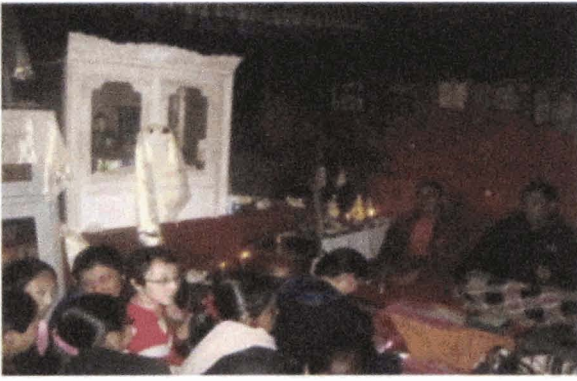
*Namkila Pass, 12,  
at 12,204 feet.*



*Drama act during Muhuram.*



*A local Buddhist lady with  
her grandchildren.*



*Buddhists of Kargil performing prayers during Budh Purnima.*



*The coldest temperature record.*



*Shia Muslim women during Muharrum.*



*Archery contest.*



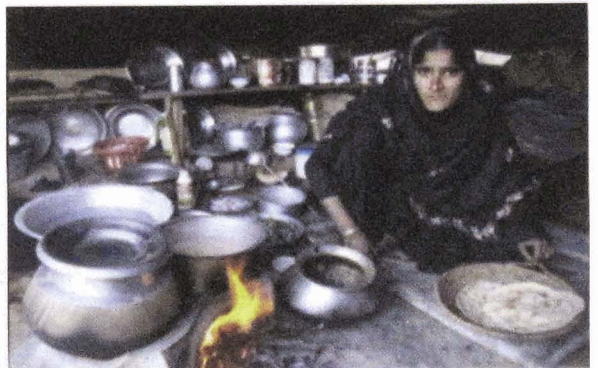
*A skiing camp in progress on nearby mountain slopes in Kargil.*



*Women of Zanskar.*



*Drass War Memorial.*



*A Bakerwal woman in her mobile setup between Drass and Kargil.*

people. Locals say that it produces heat in the body and is good for consumption during winters.

The Buddhists of Mulbek and Wakha convert surplus barley into chang. Chang is a local fermented alcoholic drink mainly consumed on festive occasions by men and women. It is available only in Buddhist populated areas.

The locally grown vegetables are tied in strings of rope and dried in the sun. These vegetables are consumed in the winters as an alternative to fresh vegetables after soaking them in the warm sun for few hours before cooking.

The severity of cold has high demand of animal flesh in the form of mutton, chicken and yak meat. For the winter months, the locals stock the flesh in specially made stores.

### HOME PATTERNS

The pattern and design of the houses differ from community to community, place to place, religion to religion, and the economic status of the family. The houses are constructed in close groups. They are made in combination of three building materials, such as mud, unburnt bricks and stones, though with the recent development in the region, many locals have also adopted use of cement and a few new patterns.

Maximum houses are built at two levels: ground and lower. There are several rooms constructed in the ground floor for multiple usage. The roof tops are sloppy to avoid accumulation of snow on top. The first floor is generally made of stones and the floor with mud, or wood while the ceiling of the rooms is low and are made of wood. The walls have mud coating, which keeps the rooms warm in winters and cold in summers. The lower floor is very much in use during the winters as it remains warm as compared to the upper floor, which is mostly utilised by the family members for dining and sleeping.

The kitchen is used not only for cooking but also for sleeping during winter months because of the presence of chullah or local stove there. The family members prefer to use this to save on fuel as

the low socio-economic conditions do not allow them to have bukharis (local arrangements used for heating the rooms) in each room. Every possible care is taken to keep the rooms warm. Thick blankets are put in front of the doors of the living rooms to avoid even a breeze to enter from any corner. The sitting arrangement in every house is on the floor except for a few houses which have added contemporary furniture. There are attractive carpets spread in houses of economically sound people along with Ladakhi Chokse (low table made of wood with Ladakhi design carved on it). On the other hand, a normal income group family of a villager would have chari (rough mat made out of crude goat wool) as his spread. There are plenty of cushions kept in the main room for comfortable sitting. Water for ablution (wazu), rosary and sijdaqah is always kept in the main room. There is a special room made for the livestock and for winter stocking.

We are yet to see houses painted in the Kargil town. The most peculiar thing one notices is that not a single house has grills, which is a sign of peace. The locals don't even lock their homes.

A few miles away, the pattern of houses changes in appearance, architecture and structure. The Buddhist houses in the entire Ladakh region differ from Muslim homes as many Buddhist houses are white-washed whereas the Muslim homes are not. The roofs of the houses are flat and are made of wood. These homes are generally triple-storeyed with religious flags or 'trichok' on four corners. A special room is constructed for prayers called 'chorkhung.' Various brass statues and pictures are kept in this room. A few houses have wooden frame-work on top of the doors with a raised plank.

The Buddhists also convert their kitchens as living rooms in winters and have well laid out kitchens displaying their crockery.



## CHAPTER 5

# Agriculture in Freezing Land

Kargil obtains the climatic condition of both the arctic and the desert and, therefore, is often referred to as a 'Cold Desert.'

Kargil is less favourable for growing crops due to its topographic conditions dipping the temperature below minus 30°. It is a normal feature due to which the locals and the livestock face shortage of food, fuel and fodder. The soil over here is a mixture of stones and gravel and high in alkaline content, which makes it less productive. Also, due to the topographic layout of the area, the texture of the soil varies from place to place and the growing season is short. These unavoidable conditions have left the denizens not to be very choosy in their food habits.

The terrain experiences severe, rather bone piercing, chill and its aftershocks are experienced by not only humans and animals but also by the land. The soil is badly affected and it is certainly a herculean task for the locals to prepare the field for cultivation as the land remains buried under thick volumes of snow. However, the brave and hard working locals carry out their work in the most perfect manner.

March is the month when the sun starts appearing occasionally and the locals start coming out of their homes after months of hibernation. Men and women are spotted in fields with their traditional tools and back-pack baskets (Tchepo).

The soil, which remains under thick blanket of snow almost for five months from November to March, involves a lot of effort by the farmers to clear up. Following the age-old traditions, the locals start their cultivation process after celebrating the festival of Navroz of Shia Muslims, falling on 21 March.

The major crops grown in Kargil are barley, wheat and peas while vegetables like turnip, raddish, potato, carrot and various types of leafy vegetables are also grown. With the help of modern technology, tomato, cabbage, cauliflower, brinjal, onion and many other vegetables are also being grown here now.

Fruits like apricots, apples, chulis, pears and grapes are grown only in limited areas where double cropping is available. Kargil is famous for its apricots.

Barley and wheat are the staple diet of the locals here. Mesmerizing local folklores are sung by the farmers narrating the story of their ancestors while they follow traditional methods to melt the thick snow collected over the fields. In this process, a thin dry layer of soil is spread over the snow, which helps in absorbing and retaining the heat and, thus, helping the snow to melt prematurely. This is an unknown scientific method developed by the ancestors of this region. Bread, thukpa, marzan and skew are also prepared of wheat. Rice was seldom used in ancient times, as the soil of Kargil did not produce rice. However, with changing times, paddy fields have come up and rice is extensively grown and used now.

*Satabs* is another age-old method followed here for converting human waste into manure and melting the snow before natural time.

In this method, the human waste is collected centrally at *Chaksa* as the local toilets are called. The process starts with the digging of a deep pit inside the *chaksa* (toilet).

The *chaksa* is double storeyed and has a wooden or stone staircase. A *chaksa* is a totally traditional toilet and has a small door on the ground floor, which serves as an outlet to take the soil out to the fields. There are wooden planks on the floor with two holes drilled in them. These planks are used as the seat for defecation. The dropping gets collected down and there is a heap of mud kept aside, each time a family member uses the toilet, he or she is supposed to cover it with the mud. The manure is ready to use after six months of its process solving the dual purpose.

With the developments in recent years, farmers have adopted scientific methods and modern techniques which have proved beneficial in shaping the economy of this treacherous region to some extent but locals say that this development has led to the loss of actual taste of the crops. Locals are also resorting to mechanical farming by using power tillers. The government has initiated steps towards ultra-modern techniques to boost agricultural activities by introducing mechanical harvesters on trial bases in addition to agriculture department with the help of Sher-e-Kashmir University of Agriculture Science and Technology (SKUAST).

To grow vegetables in severe winters, few green houses have been set up by the agriculture department where vegetables like brinjal, turnips, chilies, cauliflower and many more varieties are grown, though the supply of these is not sufficient to reach every citizen of the district.

The soil in the mountainous region of Kargil varies from place to place due to its difference in altitude and moisture content. It is due to this that crops and vegetables are selectively grown. The average rainfall in Kargil is 26 centimeters only.

There are two crops grown in a year. *Nas*, as the locals call barley in Purki language, and *Krow* (wheat) are sown from March onwards.

The areas of Karkitcho, Kargil town, Hardass to Saliskot and the villages from Silmo to Garkone get a double crop of barley, wheat, peas, bajra and vegetables while the other areas of the district get only single crop of wheat, barley, peas and some varieties of vegetables, including a few locally found vegetables.

Drass, the coldest of all the places in Kargil, is naturally blessed with various naturally grown vegetables and herbs. Black cumin (jeera/shahi jeera) is grown naturally in the mountains and is mostly found in the of Jandiyal and Tesbow villages. Though the production is not very high but it suffices the needs of the locals. It is not easily available in the open market but can be bought through known sources. May, June and July are the three months that receive rains. This is sufficient to grow mushrooms. These mushrooms are broader in size as compared to normal mushrooms. Mostly, it is

found in Matayan, and Kargil Battle School. The locals use it fresh in the season and dry it in summers for consumption in winters.

Sheelo-shah or Luck is a green leafy naturally grown vegetable in the high mountains and is found only when the snow melts as it is grown under the melting snow.

One peculiar type of grass, Palang, is grown in Drass, which is used as fodder for the livestock. It is considered not only an excellent fodder but is also used as an antibiotic for the livestock against skin infections. The grass is powdered and mixed with mustard oil before being applied on them. Palang has some strong agents which peel the skin if proper care is not taken during its cutting. In Drass, the harvesting begins after the cutting of palang sometime in April.

In order to increase agricultural awareness and possibilities of growing new crops, the army has been taking initiatives in this regard. The army organises training capsules in consultation with the Defense Institute of High Altitude Research (DIHAR) on advanced vegetation production technologies.

In the year 2011, the scientists of DIHAR introduced possibility of garlic cultivation during the snow-bound winter through correct procedures. It took time for the authorities to convince the locals to provide one kanal (500 sq.m) land, following which they sowed the seeds of garlic in the month of September. Slowly, the locals have started adopted the innovative farming techniques introduced by the army.

In the month of May, the country side experiences white blossoms over the trees and by August, the fruits ripen lending a beautiful landscape all around with fragrance. This is chuli, or Halman, as the locals call apricots. Kargil district produces the best of apricots. The cultivation of apricot is restricted to sixty-six villages out of the total 129 villages in the district involving 2,500 households engaged in the cultivation of this fruit crop. The best varieties of apricots are grown in Karkit Choo, Shilickchey and Hardass.

## APRICOTS

The fresh fruits are very neatly scattered over yak hair blankets, locally called *Fyarba*, and other available sheets over the roof tops of houses under the scorching sun for drying. A variety of products are made out of apricot. Jam, juice and oil are extracted out of this fruit. Oil is extracted from the bitter seeds of the apricots and it is believed that the oil is good for massage. The locals also use it for cooking apart from mustard oil, which is generally used by the locals now a days.

It is very unfortunate that the state government has put a ban on the export of fresh apricots outside the state for the last forty plus years. It is believed that there is a disease (codling moth) in the apricots here which could spread its wings once it reaches out, affecting the crop of Kashmiri apples. However, the locals find the ban as an irony on their economy as they understand that this is a game devised by the state government to safeguard Kashmir's apple crop production.

In the past, the apricot growers suffered a drought-like situation due to lesser rains, which created a panic situation among the growers as it threatened disrupting the good quality of apricots for the next seven years. It is believed that such natural disaster would adversely affect the quality of the crop. The locals demand for enlistment of irrigation facility by the state government and also to lift the ban on the export so that the growers get benefitted and improve their economic status. The other fruits grown in the district are grapes, mulberries, pears and apples.

## CHAPTER 6

# Inter-community Relations

The Buddhists and the Shia Muslims of Kargil have been living together since ages. According to the history, Harchu Khan, the Shia ruler of a principality in Kargil, had married a Ladakhi Buddhist princess. Both shared friendly and cordial relations with the people at both the ends. In another historical incident, the 17th-century ruler of Ladakh, Jamyang Namgyal, tied nuptials with Gyal Khatun, daughter of the Shia ruler of Khaplu. Gyal Khatun did not convert into Buddhism and remained a Muslim till her death. It is believed that her son was instrumental in spreading Islam in that belt.

There are numerous historical stories telling about the close and positive relations shared by the two religions in the olden days even though wars were fought between the two. The son of the last independent ruler of Ladakh, Thundup Namgyal, had married a Muslim girl who was known as his queen.

With the changing times and the political development in the mountainous region, inter-religious marriages on mutual consent are not heard openly anymore.

In July 1989, violence was reported in Leh over a fight between a Buddhist and a Muslim youth, which spread like fire in the other parts of Ladakh leading to clashes.

Reacting over the scuffle, the Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) imposed a boycott and raised the issue of a separate constitutional status of a Union Territory for Ladakh. LBA demanded strict boycott of Muslim shops targeting mainly the Kashmiri Muslims, who were the main traders in Ladakh, along with the Sunni Muslims of Ladakh, who were believed to be

sympathisers of Kashmiri business associates. Later on, the Balti Shias were included in this who were also considered the business associates. The LBA levied a fine against the Buddhists who visited Muslim shops. This raised a controversy which affected the Shia Muslims living in Kargil. The relation between the two remained tense and brittle for long.

In the year 1992, the government intervened with the decision of not taking up the LBA demand until they ended the boycott. This boycott was called off by the end of 1992 with an agreement between the Ladakh Buddhist Association and the Ladakh Muslim Association, which represented both the Shias and the Sunnis of Leh.

The Buddhists living in Kargil claim that they do not enjoy the freedom of their religion, and feel suppressed. The district has the maximum number of Buddhists in Zaskar where they live in majority and have no bindings.

The majority of Buddhists found in Kargil are at Wakha and Mulbek, which has mixed population. The Buddhist followers in Kargil town mainly comprise state and central government employees, some transients and a few employees of the private organisations. The Buddhists here claim that they do not have any religious place for worship and they also claim that they are not allowed to carry out routine worships in the ancient gompa situated in the town. On the other hand, the local Muslims claim this as a sarai (Inn).

In year 1995, the Buddhists protested raising several demands, such as a place to worship, a community centre or a place for celebrating festivals and for the cremation of the dead. To curb the protestors, the Buddhists were promised a land near Khumbathang but no official evidence is available to substantiate the claim.

The Buddhists claim that land was given to the Ladakh Buddhist Association in 1961 by the government to construct a shrine but later the decision was changed in 1969, which stated that the shrine would be the place for travellers to stay. However, it was later demolished. Yet, no written proof is available on this claim. The

structure which is in deplorable condition is open to Buddhists to offer prayers during Buddha Purnima. During my research, I was lucky to witness this structure during the Buddha Purnima celebrations in the year 2009. I was told by a devotee that this monument was demolished after the change of government order in 1969, on the pretext of Muslim leaders saying that any non-Muslim monument next to the mosque would invite divergence. Since then, no construction has been allowed. Commenting on this, one of the local Muslim leader said, "We have no such objection as we have asked them to construct a worship place on a hill top as it is observed that generally the Gompas are constructed away from public places."

The bitterness had set in causing a split between the two religions in the year 2000. This came in after the killing of three monks of Zanskar Valley (majority of Buddhists live here) who were shot dead by Kashmiri militants. Protests were carried out by the Buddhists of Zanskar against the innocent killing of the monks.

In Padum, the harvesting of crop is done earlier than the Buddhists, and the Muslims claim that they follow this as an age-old practice inherited from their ancestors.

In the same year, a minor dispute occurred over the grazing of livestock. The epicenter of the incident was Padum. The tension gripped when a few local Muslims left their livestock which entered the fields of the Buddhists and stepped over the ripe crops. The Buddhists pelted stones on the cows to make them run from their fields. This angered the Muslims and they asked for the reparation which the Buddhists did not accept as they first demanded the Muslims to pay for their damaged crop, which further aggravated the relations between the two.

The year 2006 witnessed communal clashes in Kargil between the Buddhists and the Shia Muslims in town. This started as the Muslims alleged of finding some torn pages of the holy *Quran* as well some missing pages of holy book in Khangral at Budhkhharboo. This resulted in massive clashes spreading up to Leh. Reportedly, the locals got into clashes with the police and burnt the office of the



Superintendent of Police at Kargil. This led to a curfew in Kargil and Leh. Armed forces were put on alert on the streets to take control of the situation. There was too much of anger flared among the locals.

The struggle did not end here for the Buddhists, as according to them the Muslims of Kargil had decided among themselves not to sell any commercial and residential property to them, which made them feel as though they were not part of the district in the true sense. "Is this treatment meted on us because we are Buddhists," questions a local Buddhist of Kargil.

In the most recent clashes, the communal riots had triggered on 28 November 2011 at Phokar in Kargil district. It occurred during the celebration of the Buddhist festival Losar and the Muharram of the Muslims. The clashes occurred between the Buddhists and the Muslims over a land dispute which has been surfacing for the last one year. The tension flared up when a mob started pelting stones at the people celebrating Losar. Three Buddhist girls were injured during the stone pelting, which resulted in the growing ethno-religious conflicts in the region.

The LBA took out a march protesting against the incident and demanding for a quick and strict action against the defaulters, threatening situations to worsen in Leh and Kargil if their demands were not met. LBA is of the opinion that the Buddhists are in minority in Kargil and that is the reason why for the past many years they are being suppressed.

LBA observed Leh bandh showing their anguish. People from all walks of life participated in the rally, showing their concern over the incident. People shouted slogans like, *shame shame, Kargil Government* and *Nahi Chalegi-Nahi Chalegi, Goonda Gardi, Nahi Chalegi* (hooliganism will not be tolerated). This issue was resolved amicably by both the communities later on.

## CHAPTER 7

# Women

Education for women of the area was unheard of earlier. But now winds of change have swept the region. The transformation would not have been easy but for the initiative taken by courageous women like Jameela and Khatija, who felt that education of girls was imperative for the progress of society.

Jameela was born in 1906 to Marayam and Ibrahim. Her parents moved to Shimla, where they used to work as labourers. In those days, education for girls was thought to be a sin. Jameela lost her mother at the age of 14. She took care of her family but continued her studies in Shimla. "It was not an easy task," says Dr Fida, grandson of Jameela. Later, she moved to Kargil, and at the age of 23, she got married to Ibrahim.

The newly married couple shifted to Leh, where Islamia School welcomed her as the first woman teacher of the town. Says Dr Fida, "There she delivered religious talks to the community. In 1935, she was appointed a government teacher in Kargil and, thereafter, she decided to settle down there. Her mission to promote education amongst girls was taken up as a challenge, and she gradually established her status. The people from whom she expected support for her mission to make Kargil girls literate were the ones who opposed her."

There was a lot of opposition from religious preachers and from the male-dominated society. When she realised that people were not accepting the concept of education for girls, she started inviting girls from affluent families. In order to motivate children, she taught them the art of designing woollen garments and stitching.

Jameela continued with her mission even after her retirement in 1972. She used to gather children from the neighbouring areas, bring them home and teach them. She died in 1993. Says one of her students, who fondly remembers her, “She always told me that there is Allah in education, and the more you learn, the more close you are to him.”

Khatija Begum from Skardu was born in 1929. After she completed her primary education, she started a campaign to spread education awareness in Kargil, the first of its kind in the town. She remembers her days of childhood when her family used to be criticised for imparting education to girls.

She narrates, “I always enjoyed reading and writing. I used to cover a distance of six days on horseback from Skardu to Kargil to take my exams. There were no proper roads, and the terrain was bad.”

Khajita Begum studied History, Maths, Urdu, Hindi and English, which was a great achievement for a girl from Kargil. In 1950, she became the first woman teacher to be appointed in the local government school. Today, she thanks Allah for the opportunity given to her for the noble cause of imparting knowledge and spreading education in a rather conservative society.

Excitedly, Khajita Begum says, “My daughter, Kaneez Fatima, was the first girl from Kargil to become a graduate when she passed out from Women’s College, Srinagar.”

Kaneez Fatima, too, faced a lot of criticism from friends and society during her formative years. After the completion of Class X, even her relatives opposed her further education. But her parents stood firm on their decision to impart education to Kaneez and her siblings.

After her graduation from Srinagar, she returned to Kargil to pick up a job as a teacher in Girls’ High School. Kaneez later joined the Education Department. Education for girls was low on society’s priority list, and she had to really work hard and motivate families to allow girls to get educated. A friend of her adds that after her promotion as Tehsil Education Officer, she used to move to distant villages and organise activities to promote education of girls.

A small group of socially aware people has formed the Women and Children's Welfare Association, of which she is the main functionary. The organisation is working to address development issues concerning women and children.

It has been a daunting experience for women like Kaneez to rise against the popular view that education is not vital for the fairer sex. Today, Kaneez holds the position of Deputy Commissioner at the Headquarters of Navodaya Vidyalaya, New Delhi.

Zahra Banoo (39) broke many barriers to enter politics. She registered her name as the first woman of the Ladakh and Kargil regions to contest elections for a local administrative body, which were held in September 2008. "I joined politics as a challenge to prove that the women of Kargil can rub shoulders with men in the male-dominated political scenario. As a regular citizen, many a time I had approached the local authorities with the problems of women of Kargil, but these were never attended to."

Kargil has seen a big change because of such enthusiastic women who, despite obstacles, conservative society and critics, have brought a revolution in girls' education. "I firmly believe that if a woman is educated, then her entire family is educated," says Manzoor Ali, who is educating his three young girls.

Kaneez says that girls now even participate in sports. In 2006, girls started taking training in taekwondo. "Though it was not easy to introduce such games in the school curriculum, my inspiration—Jameela and Khatija—motivated me to do so. We used the media to convey the importance of sports. Lectures were given in mosques, and religious preachers were instrumental in helping us spread awareness. Girls have now also been participating in kho-kho, archery, badminton and table tennis competitions, she adds enthusiastically."

## CHAPTER 8

# Tourism and Sports

### TOURISM

Tourism in Kargil is a hidden treasure which needs to be explored by the tourists visiting here. Here one experiences blends of Iranian culture to Tibetan influence. There are various Buddhist rock carvings. In fact, certain newspapers have reported that after the destruction of Bamyān Maitreya, such carving or masterpiece of work is found only here.

Kargil today has battle honour though various wars have been fought including that in 1965 and 1971. It has seen bloodshed during the 1947 India-Pakistan partition but has stood out as a bold mountain after the most televised conflict of 1999, which became worldwide famous as the 'Kargil Conflict'.

To mark respect to the brave soldiers of yesteryears as well as recent years, several monuments have been raised. Tourists plying on this route pay homage as they pass by such memorials.

### DRASS WAR MEMORIAL

There stands a shining wall on NH- 1D reminding one of the gallant and brave soldiers of the Indian Army who not only have embedded their names in the pages of history but have also made space in our hearts.

The Drass War Memorial with Tololing Ranges in the background is the beautiful monument built in Drass. There stands a tall epitaph with all the names of the brave soldiers who sacrificed their life during the 1999 Kargil conflict.

Going through the memorial, one reaches the flat steps of War Memorial Gallery named after the Paramveer Chakra awardee

(PVC) Captain Manoj Pandey of 13 Jammu and Kashmir Rifles. There also exists a souvenir shop.

### **ZOJILLA WAR MEMORIAL**

Situated at 11,578 feet is the Zojilla War Memorial, which was established in 2009. This memorial commemorates the valour and sacrifices of martyrs of the 1947-48 war with Pakistan.

### **PAN DRASS WAR MEMORIAL**

Set in the backdrop of high altitude snow-capped mountains is the Pan Drass War Memorial. It immortalises the sacrifice of soldiers of 2/5 Gorkha Rifles and 315 Field Regiment (Kargil).

### **SANDO TOP/SANDO BASE**

One can visit Sando Top/Sando Base by undertaking an hour-long journey from Drass after the clearance from army as this has yet not been opened to tourism due to security reasons. Tourists having relations in the army have been utilising such opportunities to get a glimpse of Pakistani posts from this point.

### **MUSHKOH VALLEY**

The Mushkoh valley of flowers lies 8 kilometers uphill from Drass town. This valley is situated at an altitude of 3180 m and echoes the sacrifices made by the valiant soldiers of Indian Army in 1999.

### **DRAUPADI KUND**

While coming from Srinagar, one comes across a deep blue colour pond on the road side near the village Pandrass. It is believed that the queen of the Pandavas, Draupadi, used to walk down the hilltop to bathe. Locals believe that on the hilltop is a temple which no naked human eye can see. It is also believed that in case of problems in conceiving, if a woman drinks water from the pond, she will bear a child.

### **BUDDHIST SCULPTURES**

The fluttering flags are the sign for a Buddhist monument. On the road at Drass, there are ancient Buddhist sculptures epigraphically

dating back to the pre-Tibetan period of Buddhism enclosed by walls from two sides.

### **BIMBAT**

After crossing Kargil market comes an 11-feet stone lying in sleeping position resembling a tomb. It is believed to be existing here since the 16th century. In Shina language (language spoken by the Dardis of Drass), 'bat' means stone and in Sanskrit. 'Bimbat' means Stone of Faith.

The locals refer to it as 'astana' (a shrine of peer) and in the local language call it 'Babe-ul' (grass field). They also say that there is reference of this stone in Hindu religious books as some tourists have mentioned it to them.

The locals say that in the earlier days, the women used to take mud from here to put it in the churning pot to settle the curd. In lieu of thanksgiving, they would come and rub butter over the stone. The other strong belief is that the mud taken from here is a good omen for the women who are unable to conceive. There exists a village here, named Bimbat, which has 135-140 houses.

### **ISLAMIA SCHOOL**

Islamia School Kargil: Situated in the heart of the town is the Anjuman-e-Jamait UL Ulamaa Houzai Elmiya Madrasai Isna Asharia Islamia School, which is the one and only Islamic centre in Kargil district.

### **TRESPONE IMAMBARA**

Trespone Imambara (Suru valley): Situated 22 kilometers from Kargil, it presents a blend of Saracenic and Tibetan architecture on an Imambara which is worth visiting.

### **BUDDHIST ATTRACTION**

Mulbek Chamba: It is a salient and enormous figure carved into the rock body that one comes across on the way to Leh from Kargil. The figure represents a standing Maitreya Buddha or future Buddha. A small temple is constructed just below the Chamba.

Some local Buddhists say that it dates back to the Kushan period whereas present-day scholars mark it to the 8th century. Tourists throng this Chamba to see the masterpiece of art.

**Mulbekh Gompa (Monastery):** Located on a rocky cliff is an ancient gompa famous as Mulbek Gompa. It is situated deep inside the village and is adorned by frescoes and statues.

**Shargole:** The village of Shargole is five kilometers short of Mulbek and 35 kilometers from Kargil on Kargil-Leh road. On a cliff edge hangs an old monastery called Ge-Lugs Pa. Like any other monastery, Ge-Lugs Pa is also adorned by many beautiful frescoes.

### PHOKER

Phoker lies 4 km ahead of the Shargole Monastery and leads to a tall standing hill. After a steep climb, one reaches Phokar Rizong/Urgyang Dzong. Tourists looking for a place for meditation find Phokar Rizong most suitable for the calmness it offers and for its salient qualities. It is said that Padma Sambhava used to meditate in these caves. There is a tiny temple in the middle. There are two routes from the plains to the Rizong. The cave route, at around 1 km, is much shorter. However, in June and July, when the snow melts, it is not possible to use this route and one will have to take the longer (3-4 km) route instead.

Sankoo, 42 kilometers from Kargil, is an open tourist spot with open fields, making it an ideal location for picnic. It attracts a standing chamba adorned with jewels and has small Buddha sculptures carved along the sides of the statue. The chamba is a completely cut out from a rock.

Apati is an uphill village with a salient feature of ancient rock carvings. Rock lovers can go around the village meeting the locals of Apati and also see the carvings.

Batallik, 56 kilometers from Kargil, lies on the most picturesque route of the valley. This is an alternative route which was initially banned to the tourists but since 2010, the government has lifted the ban.

The shady route takes you around four famous villages: Dah, Hanu, Garkon and Darchik. The denizens belonging to Drokpa tribe live in these villages. Batallik was one of the biggest war zones in 1999 Kargil conflict.



Drokpas claim to be the descendants of pure Aryans. They are fair and have sharp features, with blue and almond-shaped eyes. They show resemblance to the Greeks. They have guarded their racial identity for centuries.

One must see the sun set at Kargil as it is famous for it and capture the same in one's camera. As you pass through the village Shakar-Chiktan, you will see the ruins of one of the palaces belonging to Thatha Khan. Chiktan is famous for its folklore and music.

### **GURUDWARA CHARAN KAMAL SAHIB**

The gurudwara Charan Kamal Sahib is built near the Suru River and it was Guru Nanak Devji who after meditating at Leh near the magnetic hill, famous as Pather Sahib Gurudwara, stopped here for a few days. Later, a gurudwara was built which is managed by the army here.

### **BABA PLATEAU NATH MANDIR/TEMPLE**

This temple is a source of strength for the soldiers deployed in this sector as soldiers believe that Baba saves and guides us at every moment. There is a shed of baba where he used to live, which has been preserved by the army.

The history of Baba Plateau says that before 1971 there lived a man in a small cottage who was very pious and humble. He used to spend his time in feeding birds and animals, and in meditation. The locals realized that this man was a great believer and follower of Lord Shiva and this attracted many devotees. One day, he went missing and since then there is no trace of him but his followers are there. Today, there is a Shiva temple which came into existence in the year 1990.

## **SPORTS**

### **ARCHERY**

Archery is the customary game introduced by local kings in the olden days. The month of March marks the advent of the game. It is played to welcome the new season or the melting snow. This is the best and the cheapest form of entertainment or recreation for the

locals and has been sanctioned by their prophet Mohammed to play as a game to build their skill for self-defense. Various archery contests are held in most of the villages in the month of March. The contests are restricted to the menfolk. Women here do not have any source of recreation as the religion does not permit so.

A pile of mud, the target area is raised two to three feet from the ground level. Dressed in Goncha, which is a rare sight now, the player takes aim from a distance of 85 feet to hit his shot. The correct shot on the target, termed as 'bull's-eye', fetches nine points and the scale keeps sliding as you keep moving away from the centre of the target.

The age-old belief is that whoever hits the 'bull's-eye' will be blessed with a son and when the baby boy is born, the proud father will offer sweets and a special white scarf or khataq around the target. Also, whoever will hit the target during the contest would be declared the winner who then will be honored to wear the Khataq as a souvenir.

Women are indirect participants to this game as there is a fake battle between the men and women making the game exciting and fun. In this game, a man has to influence a newly-wed bride to give him her melong or a brass piece which was used as a makeup mirror in the ancient times. The melong is then placed on the target and he is supposed to aim it and grab the melong, in which if one succeeds is declared the winner. The winner has to slaughter a sheep or goat and distribute it among his fellow players.

Trespone, a village in Kargil, has skilled craftsmen who specialize in making traditional bows and arrows. Traditionally, Scythian bow is made out of the ibex horn but nowadays locals use bows and arrows made out of bamboo, which is purchased from outside Ladakh and is priced at Rs. 500 for a pair of arrows and around Rs. 400 for a bow.

**Bull's-Eye:** The irony of the fact is that this traditional sport is not being given due weightage and slowly it will only be found in the pages of history. It is high time that the government wakes up and makes all possible efforts to revive this traditional sport of archery.

## TRADITIONAL HORSE POLO

Polo has been the most favoured game since the days of kings here but its origin remains a history. It is believed that polo came from Aryan's Isthianian race that travelled from Pamear, Gilgit, Hunza Nagar and finally crossing Chillas entered Kargil. It is widely believed that it came from Persia through Dards. The elders of Drass are still crazy for this game whereas the newer generation is not that affectionate towards it.

The polo ground called 'Shagran' in the local language and the most famous Shagran of Drass is at Village Goshan and is named Baldik. The locals link Shagran of Goshan to AD 7 during the regime of Mohan Chotto. It is said that he constructed the first glass room or a gazebo from where he used to watch two polo matches simultaneously.

Before the advent of Islam here, polo was the most popular game of the royals and was a great source of entertainment but when Islam came in, the Muslims were prohibited to play the game due to presence of music in the game, which Islam does not permit. The changing time accepted the Muslims to adopt the game which remained for long but soon the Kargil conflict led to the closure of the game as most of the Shagrans were used for military operations. In addition, the grounds are now occupied for various infrastructural purposes.

The game remained out of sight at least for ten years though, in between, the army made attempts to revive it. However, it did not gain popularity among the locals. The customary game begins from the Islamic New Year, Nauroz, on 21 March.

Haji Mohammad Shaffi remembers his childhood years when he would see his ancestors playing this game in 1953-54. Cherishing the memories of his times, he says that polo used to be played to mark the beginning of the harvest season or 'laitchi' in Shina. The year 2009 opened a golden era for the locals when the Lalit Suri Hospitality Group organised a tournament between the international and local teams of Drass at Vishwanathan stadium, situated at 3280 m. The 'modern' players, captain of Indian polo team, Jia Sher Gill, Uday Kaalan and others tested their tack and

short ponies and tussled slipping saddles and loosened girths for a few minutes as everything related to the game appeared unknown to them, starting from ponies to the game rules in one of the world's highest polo turfs. Since the year 2009, the Lalit Group has made this a yearly affair. Another chapter opened with the entry of the Mongolian Squad in 2010.

Traditional polo had vanished from Kargil after the Kargil Conflict of 1999, when all the fields had become targets of military operations and many ponies died during shelling or became victims of mine blasts.

The locals today also play the game in the traditional style except for a few changes. For instances, there have been changes made in between the games, where the game starts and ends in the same traditional manner.

The polo players used to dress in white Goncha till the late 90s while playing whereas today it has been replaced by modern clothing. 'Bentho' (Balti word for the polo stick) used to be made of 'Shapoo', a very strong locally grown tree.

The benthos were made by the players themselves, who were skilled in this craft. The benthos were blunt with curved heads and the sharpness varied from various degrees. The length of the actual bentho used to be of arm's length and anybody having a bentho longer than the actual length was considered a defaulter.

The 'Zga' or the saddles were made of wood and the 'Ipchin' (foot rest) used to be of brass, which has been replaced by iron today. The speed of the horse was controlled by brass or iron strap.

The royals were very particular with the outlook of a polo horse. The horse had to be white or brown in colour and moderate in height, having a long and shinning tale, sparkling white teeth like pearls, posing a tall personality of a tiger from the front. The back of the horse must be like a fox and the back leg must have a curve of a bow while the front leg must be straight like an arrow. A horse with a white spot, sparkling like sun in the mid of the forehead was also of preference. Let me also add here that the older player believed a polo horse must bear a dynamic personality and must have the qualities of a wild animal in the ground. Also, it must pose like a

good swimmer in the river; when climbing up, it must have a personality of a tiger; and when getting down a slope, it must give showcase a personality of a crow; in mountains, it should climb like a lizard; and in the deep forest, it must pose a clever walk of a fox.

Today, the horses are purchased from Zanskar. The polo experts at Drass say that they make a four- or five-year-old horse walk as well as run on a polo ground. The horse is fed on local barley mixed in water apart from grass and hey. After celebrating Nauroz, the horses are taken for complete training sessions.

In the olden days the mons, the local musicians, used to play the surna and daman moving around making people aware of the upcoming polo tournament whereas today this has been replaced by announcements on radios, television and also loud speakers.

Traditionally, the ball of the polo used to be arranged by the mons in the ground in the presence of spectators. Spectators would throng early morning to occupy the best seats to see the polo strokes, which remains the same today also. During the king's regime, the players used to visit the palace before the sunrise and after having light snacks they would leave for the shagran, along with the king. The mons would caution the surroundings of the king's arrival with their beautiful beats.

The mons, or the musicians or drummers, had a great role to play during the game. Mon is a Balti and a Purky word for the musicians and Dom in Dardi.

To have a toss, each player would hand over his bentho, or the polo stick, paired either by the king's advice or by the spectator's demand. A clueless young boy would be called who would collect a pair of sticks and move them around two to three times, finally separating them one on his right hand, and the other on his left till two heaps are made. This was done to make the game free from favouritism.

There used to be two teams in the ground: one of kings and the other of his wazirs. Each team would have men near the goal area holding white and red colour flags.

The ball would be placed in the centre and any one player would go and hit the ball, called Dafok in the local language. The player who would hit the best by bouncing the ball in the air would be

appreciated for the excellent dafok or the hit. Mons would play their surna and daman. The player who would hit the best stroke or dafok would be welcomed by relatives and spectators with flowers and khataks (traditional white scarf which is used as a ceremonial scarf). They would also be greeted with homemade rotis (flat flour roll made of wheat flour or barely) with butter. The king would organise a grand dawat of dinner at the end of the game at his palace.

The player would wear a special long gown, Goncha, white in colour with loose trouser or salwar. The goncha has a pocket to keep the ball. The players never wore any steel helmets but today modern teams do wear them. "Modern equipment like helmets, breeches and other things are a threat to traditional polo," says Amin.

The locals wear Patwa made of wool, which is rolled over the leg to protect against any kind of hit but today this is rarely found amongst the players though the modern players do wear breeches. "There are no more good horses and also they are beyond our reach," says Haji Daulat Ali Mir of Drass.

Haji Daulat Ali Mir is a famous personality of traditional polo who feels proud in sharing that he still feels the sound of mons' beats fresh in his ears. He praises the Yarkandi horses, as he recollects his father travelling from Leh to Drass in two days. "Yai nasal sabse behtar," he praises Yarkandi breed to be the best in those days when there were no roads. Here he is referring to the speed and the strength of the horse. "I feel that this game is part of our heritage and we want to see it reviving," says Amin, a youth of Drass who has been working on the promotion of the game.

He further tells us that there are now three shagrans or polo grounds: Bimbat, Goshan and Chokiyal.

## WINTER SPORTS

Nature has bestowed splendid beauty to this region with natural sports treasures, which are largely unexplored. Realising the potential of this in the district, the tourism department has started making efforts to develop this fairly modern and enterprising opportunity to strengthen the far-flung town socially and economically in the area of adventure tourism and winter sports.

By the virtue of its location in the Trans-Himalayas, it offers excellent opportunities for promoting a number of adventure activities like mountaineering, trekking, skiing, ice skating, paragliding and many more.

Rai-de-Himalaya is one great example for sports freaks that has succeeded so far in bringing excitement among the sports lovers and marking Kargil on the adventure tourism map. Thrilled bikers and four wheeler racers throng this region every year confirming this high altitude as a place for thrillers.

Zanskar is already on the list of mountaineers and trekkers. It can certainly be a great hit for winter sports, opening doors for skiing lovers as well as ice skating lovers. The famous Chadar route which gets crystal frozen in winters is ideal for such sports and is already popular among trekkers.

By the side of the south-west border of Kargil district runs the Greater Himalayan Range, which offers a wide range of options for mountaineering and trekking. Camps can also be organised for this. The famous Nun-Kun Massif lying at the head of the Suru valley is the principal mountaineering destination.

No doubt, Kargil lies hidden and unexplored. The few who first explored this are the American instructors who took a trip in the eighties and described the cross-ski route between Lehinwn (Kashmir) and Kargil as the most exiting.

Similar trips have been undertaken by some British skiers between Kargil and Padum, who state this as most promising for commercialisation.

Zanskar valley has ideal slopes which can be fully explored if the pathway is provided with constant air communication during winter months. A need was felt to properly survey the available slopes in Kargil and start introductory courses to develop local talents. In this regard, the tourism department and the tourism development authorities of Kargil and Zanskar are planning to develop necessary infrastructure to promote skiing. The Kargil Development Authority has completed the buildings of Base-I and Base-II at Kurbathang slopes. Plans to procure necessary equipment and ski lifts would be future priority.

## CHAPTER 9

# Wildlife

Ladakh is nature's heaven to numerous wild animals and birds in the form of sanctuary. One finds a variety of animals and birds. In general, most of the wildlife is intense in the upper reaches. The wildlife of Kargil experienced massive disturbance due to shelling in 1999. The wildlife of the district consists of marmot, hare, fox, wolf, snow leopard, bear, ibex and shapo. The birds of Kargil are the lammergier, Tibetan snow cock, Tibetan partridge, horned lark, White-winged redstart, pupu tu tse, pigeon and khashangu puti.

Many animals became target of enemy artillery shelling, which also included the rare species of snow leopards, ibex, brown bears and wolves which were mostly found in Drass, Batallik and Kargil. According to the local residents, since then they have hardly spotted any bear though at times they have been spotted in the higher reaches. Even the ibex is frequently spotted whereas spotting a snow leopard is a very rare event. According to the figures available with the Wildlife Department, in the past it indicated presence of ten to fifteen bears in a protected area over about 500 square kilometer in Kargil before the outbreak of the Indo-Pak 1999 conflict. Ibex were in the range of twelve thousand to fifteen thousand in five protected areas spread over 41 square kilometers, out of which three protected areas fall under Kargil district.

In the recent years, there have been reports of tracking down the pug marks of snow leopard indicating its return, though nothing has been confirmed on record.

However, going by one of the news reports published in *The Tribune* dated 29 November 2011, a big cat with two cubs has been spotted in the area. Confirming this Jigmet Takpa, Regional



Wildlife Warden, Leh, said, "It is a fact that the intense cross-border firing in 1999 forced the wild animals to abandon Kargil and flee to safer places to protect themselves. However, there is news of return of big cats to Kargil as the guns have been silent for some time now." Takpa mentions that poaching has been another major cause for the reduction of this species, which now has been brought under control by the army as no one can carry a weapon without the permission of the army. This is a major step in ensuring that the animals move freely and enjoy the wild natural habitat without fear.

Takpa further mentions that there were nearly 400 snow leopards in the region of Leh and Kargil district at one point of time. However, presently there is no record and he hopes that in the near future a census is carried out and the records are updated. To improve and bring back the wild life here, the Wildlife Department had launched various projects in association with the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and other agencies to save and attract more snow leopards.

Kargil is home to the snow leopard, wolf, Tibetan wild dog, red fox, Tibetan snow cock, black-bellied magpie, northern pintail, marmot and many more. The rugged valleys and the glens are the natural habitat of the deer, antelope, wild sheep and wild goats of many kinds, which may appear en route Kargil via Leh.

**Marmot (*Arctomys Himalayan*):** Marmot is a strange, little cute animal resembling the family of squirrel or a big mouse. It is a very common animal here but strange for the tourists. Its size varies between 60 cm to 90 cm. It is found in shades of golden or a reddish brown with a long bushy tail. This animal spends long winters in its burrow subsisting either on the grass and roots or on the accumulated fat of its own body. At the sight of a dog, the marmot utters shrill cries to startle him. When the dog tries to jump at it, the marmot slips into its burrow for cover. He repeats it till the dog is compelled to give up the chase in dismay. It is mostly found in Zojilla, Drass and in the nearby villages of Kargil town.

**Eurasian Otter:** This little and cute animal can be spotted in the mountains or near the lakes as it is an aquatic animal. It has a water-proof coat with a thick and muscular tail. It resembles a field rat.

The limbs are short and strong. The colour of the coat on dorsal surface is brown while the under parts are lighter. The hairs of the muzzle terminate above the naked nose in an angular or zigzag line.

The animal is nocturnal and very shy. It is known as Churram in the local language. It often stands on its back limbs when in observation. Its presence can be recorded from its tracks, faeces, fish bones and scales found near its den. The animal secretes oil from its sebaceous glands and applies it on its skin to keep it water-proof and for protection against the cold water of the streams. The animal migrates to lower valleys during winter. Both the sexes are alike. The recorded longevity is 12–15 years. Only one litter is produced per year. The gestation period is 60 to 65 days. The litter consists of 1 to 3 cubs born in dense dug-outs amidst rocks and boulders. The mating takes place in water. The female cares for its offspring till they attain the age of one year.

Its existence has been reported from Kargil area, Suru and Drass valleys as well as lower Zaskar. The animal is represented by 10 races and is the most widely distributed otter species in the world.

**Wild Yak (*Bos Grunniens*):** Yak is the most important species for highlanders and is the main livestock of Ladakh. It proves an excellent pack for snow-bound areas due to its pointed hooves. The yak is a strong animal and can cover a distance of 25–30 kilometres per day carrying loads up to 125–150 kg. It is also used for ploughing the fields. Yak milk is used for drinking and making cheese and butter.

The Yak found here has long untidy black hair over its body, which reaches down to its legs, giving it an awkward appearance. The male has horns but the female does not. The yak mixes and even crosses with the cow; the issue is called *Zho* (male) and *Zhomo* (female).

**Fox (*Vulpes Vilpes*):** It is found all over the region. Its shade varies from golden to dark grey.

**Ibex (*Capra Sibirica*):** Ibex belongs to the family of wild goat. The firmly built ibex is very attractive with hairy coat. It has long, broad horns and a fine soft fleece under its stiff hairy coat. The

female ibex can be identified by her parallel thin horns. The shy and alert animal does not migrate to lower heights and prefers to stay in the same habitat. It only travels to slopes and areas where snow occupation is less. The fleece of the ibex is soft and cozy, and this has made it a favourite target of hunters. Ibex are mostly found in shades of brown, deep chocolate or cream.

**Snow Leopard (*Felix uncia*):** It is found in high altitudes near the snow line in various parts of Ladakh and Baltistan. It is nocturnal, very elusive, and found singly, inhabiting the most inaccessible terrain of rugged mountains. Due to its elusive nature, it is also called the 'grey ghost' by locals. In February and March, during its breeding season, it is reported to feed on a shrub, *Myricaria germanica*.

The snow leopard measures about 60 cm at shoulders with a length of about 200 cm from head to tail, the tail accounting for nearly half the total length of its body. It can be spotted in the higher reaches of Kargil and occasionally appears in Zaskar.

**Shapo (*Ovis Vignei*):** Shapo or the Ladakh urial has twisted horns. The animal lives mostly in separate herds of males and females. In Kargil district, the animal is reported from the Junkar range, fatullah, Namkila and between Chiktan and Jukshu. In winter, the urial moves to lower slopes. It rests during mid-day and grazes in the morning and evening. The animal is listed as vulnerable in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Animals and comes under Appendix I in the CITES and Schedule-I of the Jammu and Kashmir Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1978.

**Nyan (*Ovis Ammon*) *Hodgsoni*:** *Ovis Ammon* is the largest sheep in its family owing to its weight and size. There are eight subspecies of the Argali of which two occur in India, viz., Nyan and Marco Polo sheep. The male is called Nyan and the female Nyauma. It feeds on herbs, grass and sedges. The upper coat is light brown and darker on the shoulders whereas males have creamy ruffs on their necks.

**Lynx (*Felix lynx*) *isabellinus*:** The lynx belongs to the family of wild cats and shares many characteristics of the snow leopard. The

body colour is reddish-grey with spots over the upper limbs. It has heavy legs and looks very smart when it walks. It feeds on a wide range of animals, such as marmots, domestic sheep and goat.

**Goa (*Gazzela Picticaudata*):** Goa comes from the family of deer. It has beautiful ringed horns, graceful features and a sandy grey colour. This beautiful gazelle has become very rare and there is no record number of its existence in the current time.

**Wild Dog:** It is broad built furry dog and is ferocious in appearance and by nature. It is an excellent one-man guard dog and is mostly found with herds of animals of nomads.

**Wooly Hare (*Gonus Lepus*):** As the name conveys, the furry and curly hare is found flocking out from its burrow and is mostly found in rocky areas and slopes. Brown in shade, it is locally known as Riyong. It has a short and bushy tail. The animal feeds on herbs, plants, roots and grasses. In Kargil, it is found in abundance.

**Marco Polo's Sheep (*Ovis Pali*):** An ancient specie of sheep with long horns, the sheep was first noticed by Marco Polo in the Pamirs during his travels in the 13th century.

**Markhor (*Capra Falconeri*):** Rapho-chhe, as the locals call the male markhor, and Rawache (female markhor) have long V-shaped horns. The male markhor has longer hair on the chin, throat, chest and shanks. Typically, a markhor stands 65 to 115 centimetres (26 to 45 in) at the shoulder. According to folklore, a markhor has the ability to kill a snake and eat it.

**Tibetan Antelope or Chiru:** The black or brown Tibetan antelope or Chiru belongs to the deer family. It measures 75 to 85 centimeters at shoulders and is bulky. The male chiru has long horns whereas the female does not bear any horns. Its colour usually ranges from brown to black. The famed 'Shahtoos,' which is a famous, delicate, warm and soft wool, is drawn out of the chiru and is a raw material used in the production of Kashmiri shawls.

**Shanko (*Canis Lupus*):** It belongs to the family of wolf found in some parts of the region. It is black or brown in colour.

## CHAPTER 10

# The Bloody Strife

In April 1999, regular soldiers from the Northern Light Infantry of the Pakistan Army intruded into quite a few unheld areas on the Indian side of the line of control in Kargil district. Pakistan breached the provisions of the 1972 Shimla Agreement and violated the sanctity of the LOC that had been strictly maintained by both sides since 1972.

The thick snow was melting over the rugged mountains where stood the tall mountains and vacant army posts even at 18,000 feet in and around Kargil town. Batallik, which lies north-west of Kargil, is nestled within the Himalayan rugged mountains and huge boulders of thick rocks. It was the early summers of May. The Indus turned lush green passing through the treacherous terrain of Batallik, bringing atmospheric charm with some sunshine after severe chill. The people of Kargil, little known for preserving the traditional game of polo, were basking in the bright sun outside their dingy houses, targeting the bull shots on the muddy bull's-eye. Archery is the most favourite game of the locals here and is played to welcome summers, rather to get together after being in hibernation during the severe chilly months.

There were herds of sheep and yaks waiting to graze fresh vegetation at the heights when one of the yak was found missing. The carefree people of this area didn't know that some elements across the thick mountains were waiting to steel their happiness.

Tashi Namgyal, Tashi Morup and Ali Raza Stanba dressed in their Goncha, the local costume from the tiny village of Garkon, the village of pure Aryan race, singing mesmerising folk songs, had

made their way up the Banju heights with their flocks of sheep and yaks. Moving along with his fellow shepherds in the look-out for the lost yak, he enjoyed his trek through the meadows. The shepherds were enjoying every glare of the sun on the bright day of May 3, 1999 when Tashi Namgyal realised that he had moved up the five kilometer long mountain stream. Equipped with a pair of field binoculars, the Aryan shepherd Namgyal saw groups of men in black Pathan suits digging soil and putting up makeshift bunkers. Although due to distance it was not possible to establish their numbers or their strength but this movement on the other side cautioned Namgyal as he along with his fellow shepherds moved towards the downhill crossing at the rugged mountains. Alert Tashi Namgyal promptly informed first the guard commander Balwinder Singh of 3 Punjab and the officers of the 3 Punjab Regiment, stationed locally.

In the first instance, Namgyal's report was not taken into account but it could not be neglected altogether. One could not believe him as the snow was just melting and the troops at both the sides were not carrying any routine patrolling at such heights due to heavy high-altitude winds, poor visibility, and lack of oxygen. But, on an intelligent note, reportedly two patrols were subsequently dispatched on May 4 and May 5 to Yaldor (Batallik sector) and Kha Baroro detecting seven intruders on the Kukerthang ridge and two at Kha Baroro. Two more patrols were sent up on the night of May 7.

The dry mountain peaks and ridges were preparing to suck the blood from both the sides of LOC. The local army was gearing up with some active movements and this was sending signals to the denizens who were sniffing some action based on their previous experiences. The patrol once sent to Kukerthang lost one man in an ambush, while the second patrol lost two soldiers and suffered severe injuries in another. Now, exchange of fire was gearing up and so were the locals preparing their back packs. It is believed that the planning for the operation, by Pakistan, may have occurred about as early as the autumn of 1998.

“Though ten years have gone by the night when the artillery guns first boomed along with the sonic sound of fighter aircrafts, I

am yet to come to terms with the bloodshed and the change this war has brought into our lives, a change which is not very welcome, a change which we could have done without,” says a blunt Rashid Ahmad, a local from Drass who had to bear the brunt of the war. “Our generation and the one that is growing before our eyes are still haunted by the noise of the guns, the fumes and the dust of the exploding shells and innocent locals tripping over our own mines laid for the enemies. Nothing will be forgotten for sure,” says Gulam Rashid, who was a mute spectator to the happenings.

### SHELL-SHOCKED HOMES IN DRASS

Fear amongst locals in Kargil, Drass had started setting in which was evident with their emergency moves, tells an army officer who was posted during the war in Drass sector. Kargil being close to the Line of Control became the focus of all military development and was under direct shelling by Pakistani troops. The locals started moving to the dingy muddy houses of their relatives in nearby places. Trespon, 20 kilometers from Kargil, was one such village which first saw the flood of locals migrating here as it was away from direct Pakistani shelling. There was chaos all around Kargil district. On May 9, unprovoked and intense mortar and artillery shelling by Pakistani troops shook the silent town of Kargil setting ablaze the ammunition dump at Kargil. The shells wizzed around almost three days sending the town as well the local brigade of 121 army personnel in the bunkers. The dump situated in the heart of Kargil town was near the army location as well as close to the government building of Superintendent of Police and District Magistrate at Baroo. There was panic spread like wild fire in the town, which had never witnessed such intense firing before though there were few instances of fire exchange before the 1999 cease fire between India and Pakistan. Good sense prevailed and the locals living around the dump abandoned their houses in anticipation of such attacks.

The silent town had vibrant noises of shelling mortar fire all around. To catch up with the latest happenings, the locals kept their transistors switched on as every house did not have the television.

The streets became deserted, the shops were shut down, the flowing water too became silent and only huge convoys of army trucks heavily camouflaged and moving along the treacherous serpentine roads were seen. This instilled a sense of fear amongst the locals as they were not used to see such heavy rush of military convoys passing by. Further, the movement of army moving in made the rest of the locals flee to adjoining villages for shelter. Shera, a government school teacher and a freelance reporter for Urdu newspapers, narrates that his village Poyen was several times under the direct enemy fire. Since there was no concrete road, he had to carry a few villagers on his shoulders through the tracks and leave them to safe places. It is evident that the locals travelled on foot to adjoining villages carrying their livestock along with them. They term this period the most difficult one as the transport facility in the town was not regular and all the villages did not have metallic roads due to which they had to go on foot for long endless hours.

The memories of war still haunt the locals and give them goose bumps whenever they think of those days. The fear of conflict between India and Pakistan still stir the locals. Benazir, a young bride then who had set her dreams of being a mother, lost everything when her husband became handicapped. "I have been earning my bread and butter in Kargil for the last thirty-five years but I can't get over the tears rolling down the cheeks of my twelve-year-old girl who was a student in Suru Valley school. She lost her speech momentarily as while she was attending class that day, splinters shattered the panes of the classroom and killed three of her classmates," narrates the husband.

Abdul, a resident of Drass, shares, "Day by day the army convoys were increasing, passing through the famous Zojilla, which was the connecting pass between the formidable constituent of the Greater Himalayas." The people who had never heard a cracker burst were listening and witnessing the thunder of heavy bombs and shells. There were big army trucks carrying soldiers with strong faces and determination. Drass, the coldest place after Siberia in Russia became hot with the shelling from Pakistan side and later came in



tight grip during the massive exchange of fire between the Indian and Pakistani troops.

“What kept us strong were the Indian soldiers who had no frowns on their faces and assured us that our Tiranga (the Indian flag) will flutter on every peak occupied by the enemy,” remembers Mohd Wani. Passing through the non-metallic road, he walks around many houses which bore the brunt of enemy shelling. The shell marks are a stark testimony to this fact. Each household has a story of despair and helplessness and the one of Khalda Jabeen is no different. Says she, “My sister was expecting her fourth child when destiny took her away from us. My sister was in the kitchen heating milk when she heard the firing and realizing this she went to bring Hamza, her nine-month-old baby who was playing outside. She was picking him when a splinter hit her and she started bleeding profusely. The entire lobby became blood red and before we could react she was gone. The baby too was hit and succumbed to injuries on the way to the hospital,” she informs us as tears well up in her eyes. “We still don’t know why countries fight and cause so much bloodshed and grief to others,” she laments.

“Das saal beet gaye lekin zakham aur goliyon ke nishan aaj bhi hum mein khauf dilate hai,” says Abdullah. He further narrates, “We had never known what war is all about but now we can’t forget the pain, loss and the agony we are going through. We are grateful to our heroes who were prepared for the supreme sacrifice to evict the enemy from our land. The Indian soldiers have left a great impact on our lives and their legend will be carried on till the time the universe exists.”

The army appreciates the local villagers of entire Kargil for their support in carrying the loads on posts and the soldiers were really touched by the love the villagers extended by setting up open kitchen for them where they used to prepare meals.

The villagers of Darchik have not only kept the memories of war fresh in their hearts and mind but they have also kept souvenirs of war by engraving the shells on their walls. Darchik falls in Batallik sector, which was another fierce battlefield.

Though the guns have fallen silent but the brave soldiers of the Indian Army are still sitting at heights above 18,000 feet so that we don't have to face another similar situation in near future. The price paid then was very dear in terms of precious life, economy and infrastructure as far as the people of Kargil, Drass and Batallik were concerned.

Twelve years ago, the armed Pakistani intruders ran over Kargil. Nobody knew about this region then. It was a sleeping town which still remains cut off for almost eight months due to heavy snowfall. The 73-day long military conflict with Pakistani troops can never be forgotten by the people of this region.

Every local citizen of Kargil remembers the soldiers who courageously thwarted enemy aspirations in one of the coldest battlefields twelve years ago and does not want to forget the place which bore the brunt of a gruesome war.

## CHAPTER 11

# Kargil in Transformation

Back then, Kargil was a war-ravaged town with civic amenities in disarray, homeless people in a tizzy, mark of bullets piercing through the walls of homes and offices, medical facilities nonexistent, people injured in vain, orphaned children without shelter, a crippled economy, standstill tourism and a jeopardised civil administration. In other words, it was shell shocked. That was where Kargil stood twelve years back.

The Kargil of today is a study in transformation. Kargil remained hidden in the lap of the Himalayas until the war struck the Cold Desert. There were merely any roads connecting this region; in fact, locally also the villages were not linked through proper roads. People used to travel on foot in absence of public or government transport. The infrastructure was nil and people in general used to remain indoors, especially the women folk. It is not that there were no government schemes, but they practically never existed. Exposure to the outer world was negligible amongst the locals.

As compared to Kargil of yesteryear, it seems as if a new Kargil is born which is in its growing stage and is heading for a brighter tomorrow. It is very evident that the conflict of 1999 brought a massive development drive. The push was for economic growth, basic education, infrastructure development, telecommunication and tourism. Everything was carried out on a war footing, and the signs are in ample evidence.

“There was absolutely nothing here before the war. There was no proper communication network,” Sadiq Ali elaborates, “we had to trudge our way by foot most of the time, since there were hardly any roads. Even the national highway from Sonamarg to Kargil was one

way, going to be double-lane which is soon. It is only after the war that the Army took initiative and built pucca roads connecting most villages.”

Road connectivity is a first step towards development and this is what is being undertaken in this district after the conflict of 1999. Year 2005 saw the emergence of a promising Kargil. The Central Government passed 28 road projects under various schemes for different parts of the region. All this was introduced to boost inflow of tourist in the region and it also helped lift the morale of the locals.

It is very evident that had the war not hit the place, Kargil would have remained neglected and unheard of.

Zojilla, which is termed as the gateway to Ladakh by virtue of its being a connecting pass between the two regions, remained a treacherous as well as dangerous route until recent years due to its topography but no more is it the same. The road which used to be only six metre wide is now eleven meters, making way for two-way traffic though one has to be cautious while driving in any mountainous region. Twelve years ago, there were gaps sometimes as wide as 20 kilometers between army posts along the line of control and there were many avalanche-prone areas which were never patrolled before Kargil war but this is not the story today.

It was in 2006 that the road from Srinagar-Gumri-Kargil and Leh was declared National Highway-1D, which is in the process of becoming a double-lane road. Times have changed for good now for the people of this far-flung district. Earlier, the upward journey from Srinagar to Kargil was twelve hours whereas now it has got reduced to six to seven hours. Though it is still not double lane but it has been widened at many points resulting in better and comfortable journey. Today, one finds heavy vehicles plying with tons of load and also spotted are the latest tourist cabs and other light vehicles. With the development of roads, the tourists are attracted to ply from here to Leh with a night halt at Kargil, which generated revenues for the locals involved in the hospitality industry. The hotels have also improved and maintain good standards with all the possible facilities like telephone connections, television, hot water supply, and many more accessories.

Zanskar valley, which lies almost 230 kilometers from Kargil, is the most famous tourist spot in the entire district. It attracts national as well as international tourists from June to September, when the route is open for thorough traffic after being closed for eight months due to heavy snowfall. Presently, the route from Kargil passes through Padum via Penzila, which is the only motorable road since the seventies. It takes almost twelve hours to reach the valley and the route worsens after Penzila making it bumpy and dusty. This time taken for the journey would reduce once the metallic road is ready.

As an alternative route to Zanskar, the Border Road Organization (BRO) has initiated the work on 160 kilometer stretch connecting Chadar to Nimoo Nayoma Leh route. The BRO in the year 2000 started construction of the Chadar road from Nimoo to Padum. This would provide connectivity between Zanskar and Leh and make for a shorter route, giving respite to the locals who since ancient times have been walking 140 km over 14 days from Padum, the district capital, to Leh to trade their wares, drop children to school, or visit the sacred monasteries during festivals. This is that time of the year when the passes are snow bound. The only way to get in and out of villages is by walking on the sheet of ice, covering the Zanskar River. There are reported incidents of locals travelling on this route and getting trapped under snow blizzards and avalanches though in recent cases, the locals have been airlifted to safer places. It is very interesting to know that the postman uses the Chadar route twice in the winters for the delivery of mail.

The Chadar route in the earlier days, served as a trade route for the people.

The Chadar trek, as it is known among winter sports freaks, is considered one of the most fulfilling and demanding journeys. The conditions can be tough and sometimes the ice can be broken in places, forcing the trekkers to climb over steep slopes. Sometimes when there is no option, one may have to duck-walk on the freezing waters of the river. This has attracted many tourists today but

mostly the foreign nationals who are more adventurous. After the completion of this metallic road, it is sure to attract many domestic tourists as well. The working season is short with the temperature dipping to minus (-) 35° enabling the workers to carry construction work.

No doubt, road connectivity plays a vital role in the socio-economic development of any place, and this is what Kargil is heading towards.

Work is also underway on the Kargil-Sankoo road. Sankoo is one of the blocks of Kargil and is a vast place unlike Kargil. It has tourist spots but remains unexplored due to lack of proper road connectivity. There are devotees coming to offer prayers at Astana near Karpo Khar. One finds remnants of ancient Buddhists here with the presence of 27 feet grand rock statue at Sankoo, which is great tourist attraction here.

Former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee had laid the foundation stone for the ambitious Rohtang Pass tunnel near Solang Nallah, about 18 km from Manali, in 2002 after the Kargil conflict to meet the necessity of an all-weather alternative route to Ladakh region. It is likely to be completed by the year 2015.

The major development the locals of Kargil are looking forward to is the construction of Zojilla tunnel, which has been a long pending demand. There have been high level talks several times on this issue but with no positive gains. Reportedly, 2011 has seen positive response from the Central Government as well as the State Government. A company has been assigned to carry out a detailed project report to be submitted to the Central Government. The construction of this tunnel would uplift Kargil socially and economically.

A bright thought struck the government to ease the pain of the locals here in winters when Zojilla is closed. The government of Jammu and Kashmir introduced courier service of Indian Air Force AN-32 plane in 2007 to ply the locals in winters to Jammu as well as Srinagar on very nominal charges. There are sorties carried out by the Indian Air Force in winters but at the mercy of the weather.

These aircrafts also carry fresh for the local market, which is a must awaited thing in the winters as the locals are otherwise deprived of fresh and are dependent on dehydrated food. The introduction of domestic air services at Leh has been another boon for the once isolated people of Kargil, especially during winters when this region is cut off by snow for almost five months. With some luck, there will be direct commercial flights to Kargil proper, until which time the civil administration will continue the requisition of the Air Force to run chartered flights for civilian passengers.

The locals were hardly in jobs but since the time the army has come, it has flourished locals in many different kinds of jobs. The army has provided employment to the locals as porters at ground level and at heights as they are skilled mountaineers and well versed with the terrain and its surroundings. These porters carry food and other logistic supplies to the border areas without much difficulty as they are accustomed to the terrain and the rough route. Many of them are also working as construction labourers with BRO. "The Central Government is granting projects and funding the same which was negligible before the conflict," confirm the government officials here. Such developments in this far-flung region of the country have generated good source of income and uplifted the living standards of the locals here so there is no doubt that Kargil has been benefitted by the conflict though they lost too. In fact, it is very interesting to know that after the army set in, the greenery increased over here by way of plantation drives. The difference is being experienced by the locals as well as by the people who have been visiting Kargil before and after 1999 as the oxygen level has increased, which is a must with the increasing population.

The farmers now are able to get their crop to the town much faster and in a more fresh state. The womenfolk too accompany them to the markets, which is a remarkable change in such a conservative society.

To boost up cultivation and to strengthen the socio-economic status of this backward region, the Indian Ministry of Water Resources approved the biggest project of Parkachik Khawas Canal

Project in the year 2007 at the cost of Rs 350 million, covering cultivable command area of 5,587 acres in Tai-Suru and Kargil blocks.

Buses and modern-day taxis now ply these roads as if they are just another communication link, only busier than ever. Before the war, there were only about a hundred trucks in this region, but now the number runs into thousands. Enhanced army presence since then has also meant an upsurge in the local economy, as the forces hire the services of private transporters to carry goods around the region. State-owned transport services have also improved, with regular bus services between Kargil and Leh, as well as Kargil and Srinagar.

Telecom networks have also played a major role in the boom. It is a matter of pride that the remotest reaches of the region are now a phone call away from the rest of the world, thanks to BSNL's mobile network. There is broadband Internet connectivity as well, relieving people of the agonising wait for letters and news from dear ones, while also opening new doors of opportunity.

College and school children flock to Internet cafes to share their views and stay connected with friends. "Now we can see our results online, book our flights and get railway reservations without travelling to far-off places like Jammu," says a young student, dressed quite like any metropolitan youth. Asked about attire, he says he had never imagined that he would wear such clothes, but exposure to visitors from all over the places has shifted the limits of what community elders consider acceptable.

The University of Kashmir has identified 600 kanals of land in Khumbathang, Suru Valley, in Kargil and 700 kanals of land in Taru Leh in the Ladakh region for establishing its Kargil and Leh campuses.

The development took place during the week-long visit of Kashmir University Vice Chancellor, Talat Ahmad to Leh and Kargil districts, wherein he interacted with top functionaries of the district administration and prominent members of civil society to chalk out the road map for these mega projects.



“This decision has been taken with an aim of reaching out to people living in the remote areas of the Ladakh region and providing educational facilities to these communities for their socio-economic development,” says Talat Ahmad.

Tourism is picking up. While the bullets died down a decade ago, curiosity about the place has only risen. The hotels which exist today have telephone lines fitted into their rooms and have good sanitation facilities.

Visitors have much to take back and talk about. The town market in Kargil presents a lively contrast to images from the dark days of the war. Not long ago, it just had a few shops, but now a walk through the crowded market would leave you spoilt for choice. Single storey kuccha shanties have made way for regular shops that sell more than you would expect. There are bakeries and eateries serving local dishes and sweets, even as the locals have begun relishing the taste of goodies like cakes and cookies that are easily available now. Abbas Ali, president of the Merchant Association, says that before 1999 there were around 400 shops. Within the last 12 years, around 250 more shops as well as a few hotels have come up. “With the army, border roads and other government agencies at work,” he reports, “our trade has expanded manifold.”

The year 2010 opened a new chapter in the history of Kargil region by connecting it with another route via Batallik. Till now, it was a restricted area and was too low in its economic growth and development. This opening has added not only to tourism growth or travellers on its card but also an alternative connection route between Leh and Kargil. To give a positive feel to the villagers, the government kicked off a three-day tourist festival to showcase the area.

This route was earlier accessible for travelling only after taking Inner Line Permit from District Collector’s office. Before the war hit Batallik, there were no concrete roads in this laid-back sector and what existed was the kachha road which prohibited media coverage during the Kargil conflict. Batallik is known for its inhospitable terrain having high and steep ridgelines, high peaks and less of oxygen. The lost land of Batallik has made its name in the Indian

military history as the fearless battle to evict Pakistani intruders was fought here. The opening of the Batallik route is a boom for the Kargil district as it would promote business opportunities. There are many hidden sites of tourism interest, especially notable being the famous peaks of Tiger Hill and Tololing in Drass sector. It has many steep ridges and the climate is also harsher as compared the to rest of the Kargil region, which was a big hurdle for the soldiers who, nonetheless, fought bravely and did not let the enemy make any advancement in this area. It was really a tough time for the locals of this area who used to carry loads on their shoulders walking to and fro between Batallik and Kargil. Today, there is not only development of road after 1999 but the villagers of Batallik have also got source of income as most of the male members are working as porters with the Indian Army. There are medical aids provided by the army and also routine health checkups by expert doctors. Under Sadhbhavna projects, the Army has also established vocational centres at the village level where the women are being taught vocational skills.

Known for its inhospitable terrain and high peaks, Batallik was one of the biggest war zones in 1999. "Opening Batallik for tourists will help promote tourism in Kargil district. It will provide ample opportunities to domestic and foreign tourists to experience the age-old heritage of the district. The picturesque Batallik valley, about 56 km from Kargil town, is famous for its four villages, viz., Dha, Hanu, Garkon and Darchak. People from the Drokpa tribe live in these villages. Drokpas are believed to be descendants of pure Aryans. They have fiercely guarded their racial identity for centuries.

"Batallik is part of the ancient Indus civilisation. It is a virgin site. There is a historic road which runs parallel to the Indus River. There will be ample opportunities for trekking. Above all, it is home to Brokpas. To prevent ecological damage, the government has banned construction activity in the area.

"We do not want to make this area a concrete mess. If tourists want to stay, they will be provided eco-friendly tents," says Nasir Aslam Wani, J&K Minister of State for Tourism.

A railway reservation counter that was opened in Kargil in 2004 had to be closed for lack of revenue, but there is widespread demand to restart this facility. With train services finally chugging along the Kashmir Valley, the day is not far that Kargil will have its own railway station. A survey for this is already underway, exploring the possibility of tunneling through the Rohtang and Zojilla passes. The first rail link that is proposed would connect Leh with Bilaspur in Himachal Pradesh. Six passenger trains and nine freight carriers are envisaged along this 498 km long stretch, at a projected cost of Rs 22,000 crores.

Institutional development has not been neglected either. Under Project Sadhbhavna, the army has set up many institutions for education and vocational training for the people of Kargil. School children who used to walk miles are now ferried by army transport. A visit to Asha School, being run at the behest of the army, shows the power of sustained local engagement. Razia of village Hardas speaks highly of the special care and attention that the special students get here. "Society never looked up to these special children as special," she says, "and we also did not know that there are special ways to care for them. Slowly we realised that there can be special schools where these children can be trained to earn their bread and lead independent lives."

Local women are also being imparted new skills at vocational training schools under Project Sadbhavana. "These women are being empowered," says Rehana Begum. Many of them have opened small units at home to generate income. Six years ago, Kharun Nissa was bold enough to open a beauty parlour. Though this was not appreciated by the local community back then, she is now seen as a fashion leader among the youth.

Lady motorists are no longer a rare sight in Kargil. Women have taken to wheels with determination, even as they mark their presence in higher education, teaching and medical fields. If all goes as planned, even Zanskar, the district's remotest settlement, will have its own community health centre soon.

Medical facilities have shown huge improvement. A few facilities have been introduced to the 100 bed Kargil district hospital and

also a land at Khurbathang near Plateau Baba in the town has been spotted for a 200 bed hospital.

As grants pour in from several sources, many small hospitals and medical aid centres have come up; some with the aid of the army, others through the local administration. Free medical camps are conducted regularly. Mobile hospital vans, which were procured under the Chief Minister Relief Fund for the district hospital, are available for attending to critical cases as well. Pharmacy shops have increased from 3 to 13 today. A trauma centre is coming up in Kargil, at a cost of Rs 1.6 crores. There is a sub-district hospital being built in Drass for about Rs 8 crores, which would be a blessing for the people here because it remains cut off from Kargil for the most part of the year. Bimbat, near Drass, had a medical aid centre which got upgraded to an allopathic centre recently.

The construction is on at Sankoo and Drass for sub-districts hospitals, which will be commissioned in the near future. This project was introduced much before the conflict and was being funded under district plan which was too less and due to which the speed of the work always bore its brunt. It is now under NRHM and is being done at a good pace.

The changes are path-breaking. It is, of course, a matter of immense irony that it took a war to change our focus towards regional development. It was difficult for the military that brought home the perils of inadequate infrastructure in border areas. But the lesson has evidently been learnt. Development is now the story of far-flung parts such as Kargil. The locals are adopting concrete infrastructure from mud houses.

The only thing this charming little place now lacks is a cinema hall. This may not be part of the developmental cannon in textbooks, but given their love for Bollywood movies, which they gleefully share with their countrymen in other corners of India, this should not be something they have to miss only because they are 'too far away.'

A specialised battle school has also been set up to train jawans in mountain climbing and high altitude warfare, and only the best of the best pass out of the Kargil Battle School.

The main source of power in the region is the diesel generator, which also leads to harmful health hazards. Though there are mini hydro projects but these mainly remain non-functional.

The year 2005 saw a great victory on the developmental front when the prime minister of India, Dr Manmohan Singh laid the foundation stone of 44 Mega Watt Chutuk hydel power project by NHPC in collaboration with Jammu and Kashmir state government. Set with the aim to provide electricity in remote areas in the state, it is all about being plugged in, and this happens in multiple ways. Chutuk Hydel Project is soon to bring electric power to Kargil, Drass, Batalik, Sanko and Mulbek.

Kargil needs this development to promote tourism as electricity is a clarion call.

High schools have come up with good infrastructure and standards in the district. Sponsor schemes under RAMSA, which funds the schools above class 10th, have uplifted the possibility of its infrastructure and upgradation of standards.

## CHAPTER 12

# World's Second Coldest Place

*It is in a deep freezing cold that birds and trees explode and humans perish without a hope—this place is Drass, the second coldest place on the planet. Summer comes and everything cherishes life for a span of six months.*

Drass holds record for being the second coldest inhabited place in the world, after the Yakutian Tundra in Siberia. This valley is snow-bound in winters with excessive layers of snow and cool breeze. It is cut off from mainstream (Srinagar) for at least six months while connectivity with Kargil remains at stake during the winter months. The lifeline of the people of Drass is via Srinagar through the Zojilla pass, which closes down during the winters due to heavy snowfall, thus forcing the locals to stay indoors. Normally, the mercury dips to -30 to -35 degree Celsius.

“The year of 1995 was the time of punishment for all of us,” tells the eighty-one-year-old Gulam Rasool in a trembling voice running his fingers through his white beard. He further tells us, “I have seen the Magpie bird bursting into two parts while making attempts to fly as the temperature was so less for it to generate heat for flying. We witnessed our animals dying in their closed sheds because of such a low temperature. The trees also make horrifying sounds, which is a phenomenon witnessed when the mercury dips below - 45°. We suffered heavy losses that year. Today also the winters spell doom for the people residing here as they go into hibernation for almost a period of six months. In case the road to Kargil is through, then one can plan a visit to Kargil but that too has to be undertaken with a lot of risk as the roads become slippery and risky to ply due to the thin sheet of ice that covers them during the winters. Snow slides, landslides, avalanches and snow blizzards are a regular feature causing heavy damage to property and life.

The survival in the harsh winters is not only miserable but also very tough. Water, the basic necessity, freezes. Though the spring water does not freeze but every nook and corner is not blessed with this natural gift. There are water tankers provided by the PWD department, which supply water to the residents. This acts as a great respite. Imagine the life here before the development in this region. At times, due to heavy snow, the tankers don't reach the destination and the locals have to shovel the snow and melt it for consumption, for drinking and other uses. "We also use water from the frozen river by making a cavity in the frozen surface and draw water from beneath, which is further transported on horses and mules to our homes, and is a herculean task," says Gulam Zaffar of Murad Bagh. Zaffar says that there is no end to the problems faced by the residents of Drass. He mentions that "about seven years back, we were given telephone connections by BSNL which proved to be a boon for the people of Drass. However, in winters, the underground cables got affected due to the accumulated snow and have not been repaired since then. I have approached the concerned authorities every now and then but it seems they never run out of excuses as sometimes they say that they are running short of cables while at other times they tell us that they don't have skilled manpower."

There are no fresh vegetables and the locals are dependent on lentils and dried food stored during the summers. Barley is the staple diet, which they consume in the form of chapattis, and *satto* (barley powder) from which they make a local delicacy called *Papa* (cooked in water and eaten with mutton soup or pure ghee), which is very nutritious and healthy. Mutton is also consumed, which is slaughtered and stored for winters. Flesh of yak is preferred as it is cheaper than goat and sheep. Meat is stored depending on the size of family and varies from one quintal to two quintal. Since the temperature is low, it remains in good condition till the summer approaches.

The cost of living here is very high as all their earnings during the summers are diverted towards stocking the winter necessities. They not only stock food but clothes also. No doubt, the summers are so lush green that for some time they forget the haunting winters.

Their houses are generally made of mud and stones with the local *chullahs*, stove, in their kitchens also made of mud, though most houses have LPG connection now. There is no concept of having meals separately; family members all get together in the kitchen and eat together. This not only binds them together but also saves their fuel as they all sit around the *chullah*, which warms their food and also keeps them warm.

The winters are extremely harsh. For the winter months, the locals are confined to their homes. It is so cold that they stock their animals with two or three days of fodder. Locals put up blankets hanging at the doors so that the chill does enter the rooms. Even their windows are covered with thick plastics. Every house has a *bhukhari* (a kind of stove that has coal or kerosene burning within to radiates heat and warm the room). Traditionally, coal, wood or saw dust were used but modernisation has introduced kerosene- and LPG-supported *bhukharis*. Every rooftop in the town is well stocked with dry hay, which to some extent keeps the rooftop warm. The hay is nicely covered under a shade of plastic sheet or a shed.

Life in the winter months is always at stake. There have been many cases of fatal deliveries due to non-connectivity of roads and poor medical infrastructure to sustain treatment in the winters. Rashid, a local resident of Pandrass, however, has a different view: "Climate is a natural phenomena but the fault lies with the government who has not looked into our medical needs and infrastructure." Tears roll down his eyes as he narrates the story of his daughter who was expecting when suddenly her condition got worse with untimely bleeding, causing distress to her and the newborn. On consulting the Drass hospital, she was asked to shift to Kargil to see a gynaecologist. The family took the risk of transferring her to Kargil. However, as the road to Kargil was bad, she got delayed in reaching there. When she finally reached the hospital, the doctors declared the newborn a stillborn child. "These cases are very common but the government has not taken any serious steps regarding upgradation of medical facilities," he adds. Zahira the victim became emotional and recalled the story of that day. "After



four daughters she was blessed with a son but instead of welcoming, pampering and listening to his cry, I had to hear my cries and the wails of my dear ones. Had here been a gynaecologist in Drass, then even other ladies like me would not have lost their newborn babies," she said. There is no end to such stories here.

Matayan (18 km from Drass) and Pandrass (13 km from Drass) are two villages that are cut off during winters even from Drass. The people of these villages have been raising their demand to shift them in winters. But this is all in vain as there is nobody to pay heed to their demands. "Allah kay fazal sai hum sardiya kat late hai" (with the grace of god we are able to bear the winters), say the villagers.

The snow ranges from five to seven feet and in such cases one has to see it to believe how the locals connect with each other. The rooftops are covered with thick snow and it forms a platform connecting one house with another. The apathy of harsh winters make them dig graves prior to the onset of winters, as during the harsh weather it becomes impossible to bury the body.

## CHAPTER 13

# Strangers in their Own Land

“Is there anyone in the country who worries for us?” These are the anxious concerns voiced by the native Aryan tribe, residing in the small mountain hamlets of Darchiks, Dah, Hanu and Garkhun in Kargil and Leh districts of the Ladakh region since ages. This tribe is believed to be 5,000 years old, making it indigenous.

However, much to their despair, the authorities have failed to address their concerns and have turned a blind eye to their plight, leaving them in the lurch as far as basic infrastructure and amenities are concerned.

This Aryan race is little known in the country but is world famous amongst foreign tourists visiting Ladakh, who, till recently, were not permitted to visit these hamlets. Historians claim that the original Aryans or Brokpas were a group of soldiers from Alexander’s army, who lost their way while returning to Greece after the war with people from Baltistan (now in Pakistan).

The Aryans of Ladakh stand out as tall (going up to 6'6"), sharp-featured individuals with big blue eyes, flawless complexion and sharp nose. They do not marry outsiders and restrict their contact with the outside world though with the changing times and exposure, they want to get friendly and get to know the people better. The womenfolk are blessed with natural beauty. Married women knit their hair into thin pleats, which make them resemble Greek goddesses.

Music and dance are a way of life for them. Both men and women wear colourful costumes and look as if they are dressed for a function. They are nature lovers and celebrate the annual festival Bononah in October on a full moon night. They worship ancient

trees of Juniper, which are only two according to the village head. They embrace the trees individually to get energy as they believe it passes energy to them. They are very simple in their eating habits and their diet mainly includes local vegetables and fresh fruit of apricot in dry and fresh form along with barley.

They live in small hamlets surrounded by huge rocky mountains in altitudes close to 10,000 feet above sea level. Their abode has a very rugged outlook with many of the houses constructed on rocks and boulders. Docile by nature, they yearn to be part of the scheme of things in the state's developmental agenda but unfortunately their case has never got due recognition and has failed to find favour with the administration.

“We have been pleading our case with the state government for improvement and upliftment of our tribe, but our pleas have fallen on deaf ears,” says Tashi Dawa, head of Darchiks village in Kargil district. These people are not very well off financially and their prime source of income is through apricot cultivation as they grow this fruit in plenty. But here again, they are not immensely benefitted as there is a ban on exporting fresh fruit outside Ladakh, and this has been the woe of all apricot growers across Ladakh.

These people have been given a raw deal by the state government. Due to financial neglect, there has been no development whatsoever, and education for their children has always been ignored. There is no scope of higher education at all as they just cannot afford it. There lies only one middle school since 1953 and the villagers of Batallik have been drawing attention of the departments concerned to upgrade the existing school for educational development of their children. However, their requests have gone unanswered. There is no hospital, and at such regions, even appointed doctors just don't turn up.

Batallik was badly affected during the Kargil war and the Aryan villages were no exception. These people faced heavy losses and damage to their properties. Though there has been a good amount of development after the 1999 Indo-Pak Kargil war through projects such as Sadbhavana, this is just a drop in the ocean.

Wrinkle-faced Padma shares, “We are being fooled by tall promises by politicians during election campaigns, which are never realised once they come into power. What will happen to us?” She further adds, “There is also a requirement of a full-fledged hospital as we have to travel approximately 65 km through narrow hilly roads, taking almost three-and-a-half hours to travel to the Kargil district hospital.”

Ironically, today Aryans feel totally deprived and neglected within their own country whereas they are the study and research subjects for many foreign visitors, especially the Germans. It has been learnt that in 1975, a few German women sneaked into these Aryan villages in search of bearing an offspring from this Aryan race, as they are considered the original pure descendants of the Aryan race.

This incident closed all the gates opening to this village, sealing their lives. The government banned this village for tourists and also closed route entry. One could visit only after acquiring an Inner Line Permit from the District Collector’s office.

In the recent development, the route has been opened for tourists who certainly would boost up the area’s economic status. Brokpas live in the most interior and remote part of the Ladakh region. Though they are registered voters in the local Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council, no steps have been taken by the council to preserve their culture, which they have continued to safeguard by maintaining traditional rituals, customs and language.

About 179 kilometers from Kargil and 169 kilometers from the last Indian border check post, the river Shingo passes into the area of Gilgit-Baltistan and into Skardu in Pakistan-controlled northern area, which is located in the province of Baltistan inhabited by Shias. The two neighbouring regions are now facing the brunt of separation since the last 64 years after the partition of the region in 1947.

Since then, many a withered eyes are looking forward to meet their loved ones. A Balti-speaking, white-bearded Shia, Sadiq Ali,

has been anxiously waiting to meet his son living in Skardu just across the LOC, for more than five decades now. "I just remember him learning to say 'abba' and with this memory I have lived so long," he reminisces as tears well up in his eyes. There are many like Sadiq at both ends of the LOC experiencing the same sorrowful divide since 1947, binding them in the realms of political turmoil for generations together.

Habiba Khatoon waited long for her husband to come back from Kharmang valley of Skardu where he was in a job and became a victim of the divide when the line of control was drawn. Years passed without any contact between the two. One day she received divorce papers from him who after realising that he won't be able to come back ever, thought it best to free her from the nuptial tie. However, Habiba did not sign the papers. In the hope to see him, she opened a window from her house that led to the road to Skardu. The two never united and in the year 2004, she passed away. There are several such stories lurking in Ladakh and across the region. There are approximate 8,000 divided Balti families spread across villages in Kargil and Leh. Hardas in Kargil district is the village near LOC with 275 divided Balti families. The non-metallic road to this village leads towards the only villages having pure Baltis today whereas Karkechoo, Hunderman and a few other villages have mixed population.

It was in June 2005, when the prime minister of India, Dr Manmohan Singh talked about holding talks with Pakistan for opening the road between Kargil and Skardu. This announcement brought a ray of hope to the sunken eyes at both the ends and many faces lit up.

Till many years, none of the people from either side of this glaciated mountainous region were allowed to visit each other as it was not an easy job to obtain a visa but things changed and there were a few lucky ones who got the permit to visit Skardu. "The folk who went across performed the duty of a messenger for many divided families. They carried pictures and letters which brought excitement and relief to the dear ones who had been anxiously

awaiting some news from this side of the LOC,” shares Salman, a local resident of village Hardass, who visited Skardu in 2007.

“I get nostalgic thinking about my visit as I met my father’s elder and younger brothers there. My uncles had not slept for many days in the excitement to see me and same was the joy at our end. Even though we had never met each other, we had the same family blood running in our veins. On my arrival there, I did not feel any difference in the terrain or in the people who lived in the mountainous region of Skardu; everything was alike. There were so many questions from the family members enquiring about their loved ones and I spent my days and nights there in collecting pictures and letters from Skardu for my folks back in Kargil,” says a visibly elated Salman.

It is a stark irony today that the whole of Ladakh and Kashmir as well as Gilgit-Baltistan, which had been an integral part of India for over a century prior to the partition, is now at loggerheads. The denizens of Gilgit, Baltistan and Kargil share similar culture, traditions, language and religion. History tells us that Ladakh was an independent kingdom for nearly 900 years and it had over the years established its dominance in Tibet as well as in China by being propagators of Buddhism.

Going by the geography of the tribal towns, we know that Kargil is located at 34°34’N and 76°06’E. It has an average elevation of 2676 meters (8780 feet) and is scenically located along the banks of river Suru, covering an area of 14,036 square kilometers and with a population of 1.25 lacs; Skardu, on the other hand, has a total population of approximately 2.25 lacs. It is situated at 8,200 feet and is surrounded by the Karakoram Ranges.

Ladakh, before independence, had an area of 98,876 square kilometers and was divided in three tehsils or sub-districts of Leh, Kargil and Skardu. The tehsildars (administrative heads of the subdivisions) had offices at all the three tehsils. For six months during the winters, the Commissioner would hold his official activities at Skardu and for the six months during the summers, he functions from Leh. Skardu was lost along with some other areas of Ladakh in

the east during the war with Pakistan and China. The Kargil of today has 129 villages and enjoys being an independent district since 1979, after bifurcation with Leh.

Skardu remained an integral part of Kargil till 1947, till the partition of country, and now it is a part of Baltistan currently constituting one of the seven districts of Gilgit-Baltistan territory (formerly Northern Areas) of Pakistan. The remote and dusty town is bound in the south-east by Kargil district, in the east by Ghanche district, in the north-east by Xianjiang (China), in the south by Baramula, in the west by District Astore and finally in the north by Gilgit district. Located in an area spreading 10 kilometer wide by 40 kilometer long, the Skardu Valley lies at the confluence of the Shigar River, which is formed from the melting glaciers of the Baltoro and Biafo in Baltistan and the Indus River flowing from Mt. Kailash in Tibet. Skardu is the capital of Baltistan. Balti people are a mix of Tibetan and Caucasian stock and speak Balti, an ancient form of Tibetan language. Due to the similarity of its culture, lifestyle and architecture with Tibet, Baltistan is also known as the 'Tibet-e-Khurd' (Little Tibet). The region has the highest peaks of the Karakoram, including K2. In 1947, when India and Pakistan gained independence, Baltistan was still part of Kashmir. The people of Baltistan being predominantly Muslims revolted against the Dogra rulers and after a struggle lasting a year, became independent. Along with Gilgit, it is now claimed by Pakistan as the region of Gilgit-Baltistan (formerly Northern Areas). Its links with Kashmir as a subjugated people today continue to be an impediment in granting its population citizenship of Pakistan.

After the withdrawal of British forces in 1947, Pakistan forcefully took control of this region keeping in dark the people of this area, fearing that they would become a part of the federation with equal rights. Since then India has been raising this issue time and again but no breakthrough has been achieved on this front. If we analyse the political status between Baltistan and Ladakh, it seems that Ladakh has an edge over Skardu as far as the political fibre is concerned. Ladakh has been represented in the Indian

parliament as well as in the Jammu and Kashmir assembly. In addition, both the districts of Ladakh, that is, Kargil and Leh, have a powerful local governing system in place in the form of Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC). However, the Northern Areas, which also include Skardu, are controlled from Islamabad, which has a legislative council deficient in power and credibility when compared to LAHDC. The people of Skardu harbour an opinion that they were humiliated at large in the hands of urban Kashmiris as they were poor dwellers, ignorant about modern values of life and oblivious to the happenings around the world.

The conflict of India and Pakistan since 1947 has created a catastrophe in the region with wars in 1947, 1965, 1971 and the more recent war of 1999, which was much highlighted and well covered by media. Since 1999, the governments at both ends have been tight-lipped over the progress of this region. Therefore, the issue of the reopening of the closed Kargil-Skardu axis, amongst others, for the benefit of the families torn apart as a consequence of these wars, remains a distant reality.

People on both sides have been braving the sufferings in silent anguish and are contemplating whether their silence has been taken as a sign of weak submission or if it is still right to give the government on both sides some more time to iron out the differences. They are of the opinion that if the Indo-Pak borders could open up at Wagah, which had witnessed much bloodshed and mayhem, then why can't things work out here too? Various routes have been opened since the 1999 Kargil War in order to boost people's relationships on both sides under 'Confidence Building Measures'. It is no wonder then that the people of Kargil town further question that when Srinagar-Muzaffarabad, and Poonch-Rawalpota roads can be opened then why has the Kargil-Skardu road not yet opened? They are wondering why no priority is being given to their needs even while Skardu in similar geographic conditions is connected with road/rail link/air with other cities throughout the year. This region too could benefit from this boon as then they



would not be dependent on the Zojilla Pass, which closes down for almost five months during winters between November-December to April-May, as they would be having an alternate option through Skardu which remains well connected throughout the winters.

The leaders have only been making false promises and have time and again been mocking the sentiments of the people who had voted them to power on the assurance that their agenda would be looked into on assuming office. In 2007, there were talks to start a bus service between the divide but nothing has fructified so far. According to the Indian Army deployed in that sector, there is a stretch of one kilometer which requires to be repaired so as to bridge the gap but no efforts have been put in by the State machinery so far. Though local people and politicians on certain occasions have apprised the authorities with regard to the opening of the old Central Asian trade route, the successive governments have not paid much attention to it except for making false promises during election campaigns.

A small step was initiated to boost trade in 2008 when Intra Kashmir Trade was resumed between the two parts of Kashmir, the Indian Administered Kashmir and the Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (Pakistan refers to it as Azad Kashmir) on either side of the LOC, across a trade route dating back to the colonial times. A cacophony of drums celebrated this opening and goods were exchanged at the transaction point in Chakhoti, which brought a new ray of hope to the people of Kargil and Skardu. But this was only a drop in the ocean and an uphill task is still at hand if people's aspirations have to be met.

It may be pertinent here to highlight a few facts on the contentions raised by either party on the border issue in this region. Vishnu Prakash, a spokesperson from the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), New Delhi, had stated that any action to alter the status of any part of the territory under the illegal occupation of Pakistan has no legal basis whatsoever, and is completely unacceptable. Vishnu Prakash was referring to certain media reports in which the newly elected first Chief Minister of Gilgit-

Baltistan, Syed Mehdi Shah, quoted that this strategically vital region had become the 'fifth province' of Pakistan and henceforth had no connection to Kashmir. Countering the remark of Syed Mehdi Shah, Vishnu Prakash had rightfully said, "The entire state of Jammu and Kashmir is an integral part of India by virtue of its accession in 1947." Supporting the recent views of the MEA official, Chairman of the Panthers Party, Professor Bhim Singh strongly condemned the illegal occupation of Gilgit-Baltistan by Pakistan and termed the Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self Government Order, 2009, a cosmetic exercise intended to camouflage illegal Pakistan Occupation of Kashmir. India had also lodged a protest with Pakistan over its deal for the Northern Areas through the 'Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self Governance Order, 2009.' Pakistan's Deputy High Commissioner was then summoned to the Ministry of External Affairs and handed over the diplomatic letter of protest in September 2009. Professor Bhim Singh also urged Jammu and Kashmir diaspora to organise a 'Civil and Political Rights' solidarity day on 1 February 2010 to show solidarity with the people in Gilgit, Baltistan and Chitral.

The Kargil and Leh districts of Ladakh are two very important strategic areas of Kashmir but the Ladakhis feel that a step-motherly treatment is being given to them as bulk of policies and funds are Kashmir Valley centric with most of them focusing on fighting insurgency and infrastructure development in the Kashmir Valley, leaving little avenues or funds to initiate projects that will have a path-breaking impact on the social fabric of this region, that will unite them with their dear ones waiting anxiously at Skardu, and that will boost the economy and open up trade opportunities in the vicinity of their habitat. To fulfill the desire of the local inhabitants, the government of both the countries should work in the positive direction to open Kargil-Skardu road as it will not only rekindle ties and unite the divided families without any hitch and official intervention but will also help boost the economy by providing work/business opportunities to those who have left the mainstream and diverted towards a path of destruction.

The Baltis are worst hit by this divide as they have strong social and cultural links on both sides. References suggest that in 1948, the Pakistan Army had penetrated up to Padam in Zaskar Valley where they stayed for about six months. They were popularly called the 'Padam Party.' The Indian Army was at Karsha in the same valley. After the ceasefire, the UN observers arranged a safe passage for the Pakistan Army to their side of the Line of Control. While departing, the Pakistan Army took a few hundred young men from Padam with them who are now settled in the Skardu area. As far as families who have migrated from Skardu and are residing in and around Kargil are concerned, there are roughly 800 divided families and 60 refugees in Kargil, with a few more in Turtuk and other places in Leh, which bring the figure to almost 3,000 in entire Ladakh. Thus, the Balti tribe will be the most benefitted with the opening of the Kargil-Skardu road link.

When asked about his views over the road opening of Kargil-Skardu axis, the present Member of Parliament, Ghulam Hassan Khan said that "commercially it would not bring the desired results initially as is being expected but if the permission is granted to use the route up to Gilgit on a commercial basis, then there is definitely going to be a transaction of annual business worth crores." He further added that "India is rapidly growing as far as its processing houses are concerned. If Pakistan agrees to hand over a sizeable amount of the apricot produce from the Gilgit-Baltistan region to us, then certainly the processing business will be sky high as apricot is grown in abundance across the border. However, the uppermost benefit will be towards the removal of political blockage and thus it will bridge the gap amongst the divided families of both the regions."

As far as trade prospects are concerned between Kargil and Skardu, it is totally dependent on the opening of the Kargil-Skardu axis, which in turn is a clear reflection of the political will of our leaders. The development of any nation entirely depends on how good an economy it has. If we turn the pages of history, we would know that Kargil served as an important trade centre for Central

Asian merchants till 1947. Kargil-Skardu had massive and extended trade. Kargil being centrally located, was the epicentre.

Prior to 1947, the Kargil-Skardu axis was the nearest and most comfortable route. The distance from Kargil to Karakoram was almost 1,100 kilometers. Traders used to reach Kargil in 34 days via the treacherous route from Yarkin. Trade flourished here attracting mainly the Punjabis or the Lalas from Hoshiarpur. Silk, saddles, long boots, famous Yarkandi carpets, salt, wool, and medicines used to come from across while spices, cotton clothes, muslin, indigo, soaps, mirrors, and combs were exported from here.

This can continue even today with main agricultural products grown here that can be exported to the other side to boost the economy and to provide employment opportunities to many unemployed local youth. Locals want to primarily trade apricots as the quality and quantity produced in both these regions are not produced anywhere else in the world. Skardu also has good production of raisins and local herbs, which are good sources of agricultural revenue. Pomegranate, pear, peach, vine and melon are the other add-ons. The production avenues in Kargil would include sugar, apple, pears, tea (Kashmiri kehwa), garments and also local vegetables. Leh will also have an avenue in exchanging the trade through this route as it has skilled artists in the field of wood carving and paintings. This region also has great production of pashmina, which would certainly uplift the economy of the locals as well both countries. Bakery products will also be a good exchange.

In ancient times, Kargil was a repository of many minerals. There were mines of gold at Kharool while iron, sulphur, sankhiya and sheelajit were in abundance.

Much can be commercially gained by exploiting the avenues of tourism in the region. Kargil in the recent years has gained importance as a centre of tourism-related activities. The revival of the ancient 'Silk Route' would also give a tremendous boost to 'Adventure Tourism' in entire Ladakh, Skardu and Gilgit-Baltistan. Kargil is a convenient base for undertaking adventure activities like trekking, mountaineering, camping, river rafting, para gliding

(project under consideration) and jeep safaris to certain areas. It is also a convenient base for taking excursions to the Wakha-Mulbek valley where the chief attraction is a nine-meter high rock sculpture of Maitreya Buddha besides other monuments.

On the other side, Skardu too has Buddha rock carvings dating back to 8th century AD. A huge Buddha figure surrounded by small Bodhisattvas is carved on a rock, three kilometers from Skardu across Sadpara Nalah. Apart from domestic tourists, foreign tourists also visit Leh to see the ancient Buddhist rock carvings and monasteries. Once the route is through, these foreign tourists would like to cross over to Skardu via Kargil, which would certainly boost up the local economy of both the regions. Pre-historic men and animal figures are found carved on rocks along Kachura Lake with few more rock carvings and drawing of a monastery near Perkuta (Mehdi Abad) Nalah. The region has the highest peaks of the Karakoram, including K2, which is the second highest peak in the world, attracting many tourists.

Kargil has great unexplored potential in Suru and Zanskar valleys. The Nun-Kun massif has been a great attraction for foreign mountaineers prior to 1999 conflict when the Ministry of Defense closed the area. Even though the area has been opened a couple of years back, the momentum is yet to pick up. The entire road journey from Kargil to Padam is one of the most dramatic mountain drives. The glaciers of Nun-Kun descend right up to the road near Parkachik and Drang Drung Glacier near Pensi La is one of the most wonderful sights on the route. However, the number of visitors to these spots has been very limited due to cumbersome, time-consuming, and heavily infrastructure deficient approach.

Kargil is on the world map today because of the 1999 Kargil War and has famous battlefields of historical importance like Tiger Hill and Tololing in nearby Drass, which attracts many visitors from all over the world.

The pure Aryan race is the other main tourist attraction as recently the Government of India has lifted the ban on certain restricted areas such as Turtuk, village Darchik (where the

descendants of pure Aryans are still residing), Pachathang, Khangral and Shakar Chikten, which has ruins of palaces of old regimes.

Skardu and Kargil share traditional games of polo and archery which even today are played with great enthusiasm. Common tournaments in both the regions, if permitted, would revive the traditional games and attract many tourists as today it is only these two regions that have managed to safeguard these traditional games as a natural sport. As a matter of fact, the Lalit Group of Hotels has been sponsoring polo tournaments between the locals and professionals in Drass on a regular basis.

Trekking in both the regions and visits to historic places would be a boost in lifting up the socio-economic condition of the locals as it would give an opportunity to them to excel as guides. During my research, I came across a youth who had gone to Skardu in the year 2007. He mentioned that there are remains of a Hindu temple at Husaini Chowk and also a hamlet of houses of Sikhs near Purana Bazar in Skardu. These remains would definitely attract tourism. Minister for Tourism, Newang Rigzin Jora, while addressing a seminar at Jammu in the last week of December 2009, had hinted towards the opening of the Kailash-Mansarovar route through Ladakh, which would be the shortest route not only for the people of this region but also for the people coming from across and in turn will definitely boost the economy of both the regions. Highlighting the development in the tourism sector in this region, the minister pointed out that Ladakh has a distinct identity and is rich in adventure tourism. He said that efforts are on to explore tourist destinations of the area. The Governor of Jammu and Kashmir during his visit to Kargil had also declared that the government is in the process of preparing a blueprint to declare Sankoo (in Kargil) a tourist spot and if it takes place, it will definitely boost the economy of the region and open new vistas for employment opportunities to the youth of the region.

Undoubtedly, it would be an extra assignment for security agencies to tackle and provide security cover along this cold and torturous region but if a child gets to meet his father or mother after

decades of hope, it would be an unbelievable dream come true. The opening of Kargil-Skardu road would fulfill a long pursued demand of the people of this mountainous region and would not only bring economic stability in the region but also dry up the tears of many family members who have been longing to hug their dear one across the LOC since the last six decades. If Islamabad and New Delhi sit together over a table and thrash out the dynamics of this problem, it would be a dream come true for the lacs of people waiting to see the impossible happen. It would basically change the feelings of people from both the regions and countries as well, and they would forget the enormous damage done to them due to the partition. In fact, one of the major incentives would be to improve the relations and enjoy the benefits of commercial activities between the two tiny districts which share the same culture, tradition, religion, and geography.

Pakistan, too, if she wants to take advantage of this area, must open a road network, in anticipation of the future Mansarovar road link getting a green signal, through this part of the world in order to start business with Central Asia. In order to maintain peace and tranquility on the border, people to people cooperation is a must because the options are very limited. Both should shun the path that has generally characterised their relation for the last six decades and should adopt peaceful methods by more indulgence of human resource that could benefit both the tribal areas. It would be unrealistic to ignore the fact that we share common boundaries and civilization. In order to combat the forces of terror, eradicate hunger, poverty and abjection, we should shoulder each other in the name of prosperity and well being of the people of both the countries.

Just imagine if one has to reach Kargil from Skardu or vice versa, they would have to travel approximately 1,800 kilometers and undertake at least four days of tiring journey but if both the governments give the green signal to this project, one can reach here within four to five hours as the distance is less than 200 kilometers. The direct road would have taken not more than five hours, but that

route remains closed since 1948. There is a stone wall built over the pre-existing road between Skardu and Kargil where it meets the LOC, a barrier which has kept traders and also a large number of divided families apart for six decades now.

Commenting on the future bond between India and Pakistan, Member of Parliament Ghulam Hassan Khan said that “nothing is going to move smoothly unless both the nations give each other brotherly treatment.” He is of the opinion that there would be great exchange of business amongst both the regions and Kargil, which remains cut off for almost six months, will have supply of fresh vegetables and fruits throughout the year. He also commented that the people in Skardu are not leading a life of freedom and once this route is opened, there would be development on both the sides.

The Vice President of Islamia School, Kargil, Sheikh Mohammad, confided that Pakistan is hesitant to open the route. “The people in Gilgit-Baltistan live in a much poorer condition than their counterparts in Kargil. Therefore, Pakistan fears that opening of the route might create some embarrassment by the interaction among the people of both the regions,” he shares.

Thus, the plight of the divided families in Kargil and Skardu is now totally dependent on the political will of both the countries and only time will tell if humanity prevails over the vested interests of our political leaders.



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