

EDUCATION IN DRASS VALLEY: PAST & PRESENT

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The Drass valley starts from the base of the 3,504m-high Zoji-la pass, the principal gateway from Kashmir to Ladakh. For centuries, the people of Drass helped travellers negotiate the pass and transport their merchandise, even during the late autumn or early spring when the whole region remains snow-bound. They kept the mail running across the Zoji-la between Kashmir and Ladakh, regardless of the season and the climate.

The township of Drass lies at an altitude of 3,230m, 60 kms west of Kargil on the road to Srinagar. Locally called Hembabs ('snow land'), it is known as the second-coldest inhabited place in the world because of the intensely cold winters and heavy snowfalls. Winter temperatures sink as low as minus 60°C. By contrast, during the spring and summer months, the surrounding hillsides and the valleys turn into green pastures splashed with a variety of wild flowers.

The local population of Drass, a total of some 20,000 people, is mainly made up of Dards who are descendants of migrants from the Gilgit valley and other areas downstream along the Indus. Unlike the majority of Ladakhis, they speak Shina, rather than a dialect belonging to the Tibetan family of languages. Similarly, their physical features are different from other Ladakhis: they typically have a fair complexion with tall and well-built bodies, and a few have blue eyes. Their traditional dress is also distinctive. Men wear tight trousers made from the local woollen tweed under a short upper tunic of the same cloth, both of which are richly decorated with hand-made thread designs along the border and on both sides. Women's traditional dress consists of long and broad woollen tweed with tight trousers, and local woollen caps with jewellery, and covered by heavy shawls. In the past, they used to marry only within their own communities as,

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according to their beliefs, outsiders are polluted. However, this belief does not currently seem to be followed.

In 1999 Drass became known all over the world because of the extensive television coverage it received during the three-month 'Kargil War' along the Line of Control between India and Pakistan.

Literacy in Drass

In earlier centuries, the people of Drass had little or no formal education, mainly because of their remote location and harsh climate. The whole family—including children—were active participants in the total work of the household: agriculture, livestock-rearing, collecting fuel, wood and water, cleaning, cooking, looking after younger siblings and so on.

The first primary school was started in the 1930s, and the first girls' school in 1952. The first lady teacher to run the school was Hamida Begum, a local resident who had received her education up to Middle School in Kargil town. She struggled hard to increase the strength of girls. It took a long time for the people to appreciate the importance of education because of the demands of agricultural work. It was really a bitter experience for the few teachers to motivate people to think about the education of their children.

One recurrent problem was that the main agricultural season coincided with the school term. The short duration of the season meant that families wanted everybody in the household—including children—to work during this period. Families typically had to make a choice between ignoring school altogether or sending a selected few pupils rather than all their children.

Gender divisions have been a second factor influencing the pattern of education. Men and boys are mostly engaged in work outside the home, such as going to the market and taking livestock for grazing. Domestic work is done by women and girls. This includes cleaning, cooking, preparing and storing food, looking after younger siblings and preparing the house for winter. Girls may be able to contribute in a small way to domestic chores under their mother's supervision. Hence, girls have tended to stay at home and contribute to household activities at a very young age.

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The cultural bias against sending girls to the school was previously very common. People often believed that their religion did not permit them to send girls to school, or that they would be spoiled if they went. Girls go to their in-laws' houses after marriage, and their new families typically are more concerned with their ability to contribute to housework and not with their educational qualifications. By contrast, boys will stay in their parents' households and, if they are able to get a government job, then the entire family will benefit.

In the past 20 to 25 years the government has taken a series of initiatives to promote educational awareness, including providing primary and secondary education facilities in accessible places close to where people live. These initiatives have made a significant impact, particularly among women, and girls are no longer deprived of primary education. Studies show that girls' literacy (1,250) in the 6-11 years age group is higher than boys' (1040). The female literacy rate is now higher than in other parts of Kargil district.

As a result, a good number of Drass people have been able to gain government jobs. Educated women have been able to win employment not only in the teaching profession but also in the fields of medicine, engineering, and policing. Women are themselves taking the initiative, and now prefer to live in the towns where better education facilities are available for their children.

People now realise that if a man is educated, only the individual is educated. By contrast, if a woman is educated, the whole family is educated, and the education of girls is as important as that of boys. One reason for this change may be influence from Kashmir: Drass people have relatively easy access across the Zoji-la pass to Kashmir, and prefer to go there rather than to Kargil. However, there are still many geographical, climatic and social constraints which make for slow progress.

A distinctive feature which struck me is that the people have a great sense of competition not only with other districts but also within their own region, and even between relatives and neighbours. Each and every family wants to have a good and high status, and to be more influential politically as well as socially. This sense of competition is one of the reasons for Drass's advances in the field of education.

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Now that the Drass community has understood the importance of education, they are also demanding higher quality teaching. The community believes that the low quality of teachers, poor infrastructure, inadequate facilities and poor monitoring combine to affect the total education of their children. The people from well-to-do families are now sending their children to private schools outside the district and the state.

Another problem has been that frequent shelling from across the Line of Control had adverse effects on the education of children in the valley in the late 1990s and early 2000s. For many years, they had to leave their village and rush towards safer places every year, and this became part of their lives during that period.

Despite their different backgrounds and climatic, geographical and economic constraints, the people of Drass are becoming more particular on the need for better education. They are eager to help their children to be good citizens, and not just to gain a government job. People now make a distinction between 'education' and 'schooling'. According to the community, schooling is to win employment, while education is all about values and adherence to them. As they become more involved in educational issues, the people of Drass are gaining greater awareness of the issues that affect development in all aspects of their lives.