Women’s Development and Education in Kargil District

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Kargil District was carved out of the erstwhile District of Ladakh in July 1979. Spread over the inaccessible mountainous terrain of the western Ladakh region, the District lies to the northeast of Kashmir valley at a distance of 204 kilometres from Srinagar and 234 kilometres from Leh. Covering 14,036 sq. km., the district is characterised by sparse vegetation and ranges in altitude between 8,000 and 18,000 feet. Due to its location at the foot of the great Himalayan range, the District remains snowbound and inaccessible for half of the year. Most of the population resides in remote and isolated villages and is dependent on agriculture and livestock for its subsistence. Kargil has the highest population density of the otherwise sparsely populated Ladakh region.

The District comprises two tehsils, Zanskar and Kargil, divided into seven blocks: Kargil, Drass, Taisuru, Shergol, Shakar-Chiktan, Sankoo and Zanskar. There are 131 villages in the District, including two uninhabited villages, and the total population exceeds 95,000, about ninety percent of whom are Muslims and ten percent Buddhists. With almost 95% of the population residing in villages, they rely for their subsistence on the food produced in the short growing season which lasts for only four to six months. Drass, a small town to the west of Kargil, is reputed to be the second coldest inhabited place in the world, while Zanskar remains cut off from the rest of the world for nearly eight months a year.

The position of women

Literacy rates in the District are low, especially among women. According to the 1981 census, female literacy is only 3% compared to a total literacy rate of 18.86%. In this conservative society, the thrust of education, employment and cash incentives is targeted at the male population. Also in develop-
mentally activities, the participation of women has largely been ignored and their education continues to be neglected. Every summer, rural youths and middle-aged men leave their homes to work as migrant labourers in the urban areas of Leh and Kargil. This leaves the women with very little time to pursue activities other than tending to their fields and animals. They have but little time left, even for their children, and it is especially the girls who suffer most from this state of affairs.

Traditionally, boys are given preference over girls in the region. They are sent to school while girls are kept at home to help with farming and taking care of the livestock. Consequently, half of the District’s population remains untrained and unqualified for waged employment and other income generating activities, although these are becoming increasingly more important for the sustenance of the people. Socio-economic backwardness and economic constraints work hand in hand to keep women downtrodden in almost every aspect of their lives, both physical and social. Hardships are so common and deep-rooted that people have become used to these things and regard them as part of the normal course of life. They do not perceive and cannot conceive of alternatives.

The lack of education is the single most important obstacle to development of society in Kargil. This and the absence of opportunities for social interactions within and outside the District has kept the people extremely backward. In order to redress this situation initiatives have been taken to develop education and social consciousness among women of the region.

Local initiatives

Two women who had migrated to the District before 1947 began the arduous task of improving the education and welfare of women. Khatija Begum from Skardu had passed her middle level, while Jameela Begum from Punjab had completed primary education. The former started her campaign, the first of its kind in Kargil, under most difficult conditions, as people were extremely conservative. In those days, there was not even one girl’s school in the District and not a single girl was attending school. This dynamic lady played a vital role in the promotion of mass-literacy among women. As soon as a Girls Elementary School had been established, socially conscious families in Kargil District began to send their girls to school. Thanks to the initiatives of Jameela Begum and Khatija Begum, women not only began to attend school, but also started to join in other activities. The women of this society formed the cradle in which the future society could be nourished.

It is through the education of women that society is uplifted from the abyss of backwardness and ignorance; here lies the key to a healthy and socially conscious society. With a view to promoting these goals a small group of socially aware local women formed a Women and Children Welfare Association, of which I am the main functionary. Our organisation is working to address developmental issues concerning women and children. It has indeed been a daunting experience for us to rise against the popular perceptions of women in this conservative society, but through devotion to the cause and dedicated work, this organisation has been able to break some ice. People in general now expect their women to go to school and to study in order to qualify for some form of employment, so that at least they can contribute to improving the economic condition of their family.

Initially, through informal meetings in small groups, we spread our message about the potential of women’s role in the domestic economy. Word of mouth was our key instrument in spreading the idea that local women can also play an equal role in improving the conditions of individual families, so that the younger generation might have a better chance to get an education and to raise their consciousness. It took several years, however, before this message became a generally acceptable topic of discussion. During the past few years we have been able to attract a number of supporters and sympathisers who cover a considerable portion of the population. We are now ready to embark on a more ambitious programme.

Today the female section of Kargil’s population are coming out to study and participate in our activities. Simultaneously, the J&K State Education Department has made considerable progress in setting up schooling facilities throughout the District, especially in the rural areas. Sustained efforts through various plans and schemes were aimed at reaching full coverage in elementary education. Priority was also given to women teachers in the teacher training programmes to increase the numbers of female teachers, which in turn would serve to enhance the enrolment of girl students and to reduce their drop-out rate. Incentives like school uniforms, free text books and scholarships for children from weaker sections of the population, as well as special incentives for girl students have also been implemented in the District. As a result of these measures, there is now a network of 358 Government schools. At present, 236 Primary Schools, 47 Middle Schools, 12 Senior Basic Schools, 33 High Schools, one Lower high School, and 3 Higher Secondary Schools are in operation.

In addition, there is one more institution, which is fully funded by the Government of India, the co-educational residential school Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya. The objective of this school is to provide good quality modern, class VI-XII, education for talented children from the rural areas,
and to provide opportunities for cultural exchange with other parts of India. The school offers free boarding as well as school uniforms, textbooks, stationery, plus travelling expenses to and from home for all students. Initially, people were hesitant to send their children to this institution as well. As Principal, I had to make an all out effort at the grassroots level to motivate the parents. Today, the institution is setting the pace for education in the District and has an enrollment of two hundred students, including seventy girls — a remarkable achievement in such a conservative area.

Current problems

Although enrollment figures for the District as a whole are rising (currently there are 13,191 male students and 6,406 female ones), there is also a relatively high dropout rate. At the primary level, 17.79% of students leave school prematurely, while the rate at the middle level is 11.38%. Some of the reasons for this situation are: a general lack in education; the domestic responsibilities of children; limited resources for schooling at the middle and higher secondary levels; lack of awareness regarding education; lack of communication facilities; low community involvement; limited income of parents; lack of qualified teachers; severe climatic conditions; general remoteness and difficult conditions of life in the District.

Initially, given these circumstances, most of our efforts were aimed at ameliorating the condition of women in the District, with most of the attention targeted at motivating women to pursue their education. Gradually, we realised that one of the biggest obstacles to popularising women’s education was the difficult economic situation. The Women and Children Welfare Organisation devised a number of employment incentives through vocational schemes for women, to enable the beneficiaries to become self-employed after completion of their training. This would then bring enough economic relief to their families so that young girls could be sent to school.

In our experience, economic independence is of paramount importance to women not only as a means of subsistence, but in order to achieve equality with men. Apart from our promotion of education, our developmental initiatives focus on agriculture, horticulture, fruit preservation, health care, home management, and some small-scale industry. In general, we seek to build up the self-confidence of the girls slowly and steadily, so that they can find suitable employment.

Conclusion

Development research still needs to be done to improve activities for the upliftment of women. There is still a need for efforts to create and stimulate awareness among rural women in all spheres of life. Education needs to be promoted to benefit the local population. In general, participatory management, participatory living, and participatory research are required.

What is necessary among women is not simply awareness, but empowerment, to make them conscious of their interests. Family welfare programmes and development of skills are necessary to effect changes in their personal lives. Women’s minds must be liberated from the effects of male domination, and they must be made aware of their legal rights and the problems that face them. It is important that the potential of women is highlighted, also in research, so that we may be able to know much more about the District and the developmental needs of women. Due to lack of funds, effective measures to promote these goals cannot be implemented speedily, but in our opinion the following priorities should be undertaken:

1) establishment of schools in the villages in accordance to need;
2) provision of full infrastructure for the established schools;
3) strengthening of the residential school by provision of all requisite facilities;
4) organisation of awareness camps in remote villages for education purposes;
5) establishment of vocational courses for women;
6) provision of financial assistance to women for the establishment of self-employment schemes;
7) establishment of a school providing quality education in a remote area, with special emphasis on female students;
8) campaign for mass literacy and adult literacy in the entire District;
9) assistance to women in family welfare and skill development programmes;
10) education of women about their legal rights;
11) full support (financial, moral, material) to poor, handicapped, or orphaned children;
12) organisation of free coaching camps for deserving children in rural areas.

We hope that through these efforts we can address the developmental problems related to women and children. We wish to eradicate the disease of illiteracy in Kargil District and to uplift local society, but due to limited resources and a lack of funds, we are handicapped in achieving the desired goals. Our organisation is in need of financial assistance from individuals or any organisation willing to help us continue our work to help improve the lot of women and children in Kargil.