

- Tucci, G. and Ghersi, E. 1935. *Secrets of Tibet* (English translation). Glasgow: Blackie and Son.
- Vohra, R. 1983. 'History of the Dards and the Concept of Minaro Traditions among the Buddhist Dards in Ladakh'. In: *Recent Research on Ladakh 1*, D. Kantowsky and R. Sander (eds.). Munich, Weltforum Verlag.

The Scope of Tourism in Kargil District

Mohammed Jaffar Akhoon

Kargil, the western part of Ladakh, is believed to have been the first region to be inhabited by the early colonisers of Ladakh, the Indo-Aryan Mons from across the Himalayan range, Dards from the extreme western Himalayas, and the itinerant nomads from the Tibetan highlands. The region, by virtue of its contiguity with Kashmir, Kishtwar, and Kulu, served as the initial receptacle of successive ethnic and cultural waves emanating from across the great Himalayan range. It is believed that Mons carried north Indian Buddhism to this highland valley, the Dards and Baltis of the lower Indus valley are credited with the introduction of farming, and the Tibetans with the tradition of herding.

As a result of the mixing of these ethnic, occupational, and cultural elements, Kargil, once an important transit centre on the Pan-Asian trade network, is home to a society that is unique in J&K State. Due to heavy snowfalls in winter, vegetation in the District is more luxuriant than in eastern Ladakh. The majority of the population of approximately ninety-nine thousand are followers of Islam, with Buddhists constituting the second largest segment.

Compared with Leh, Kargil is much less developed in many respects, including the tourism sector. Initially, after the region was first opened up to tourism in 1974, many tourists would limit their visit to Leh only. However, during the last decade a gradual change in perception among the tourists appears to have come about, resulting in a steady increase in the number of visitors to western Ladakh. The area comprises valleys such as Suru, Drass, Zaskar, Chigtan and Batalik, the latter two continue to be off-limits to tourists. The district has great potential for different forms of adventure tourism, such as mountaineering, trekking, rafting, skiing, and hang gliding.

Moutaineering

The western boundary of Kargil District is formed by the Great Himalayan range. The world famous twin peaks of Nun (7135m) and Kun (7078m) as well as almost a dozen other peaks in their vicinity offer ideal opportunities for mountaineering, combining easy access by road with challenging climbing. Other peaks include Pinnacle (6930m), White Needle (6500m), unnamed peaks like Z-2 (6175m), Z-3 (6270m) and Z-4 (6050m). Elsewhere in the District are Kanglacha (6250m), Zimroge Tower (5210m) and Pago Rigo (5300m). Around these peaks there are famous glaciers such as those at the top of the Pensila pass.

The area also offers many spots suitable for rock and ice climbing. The most popular and easily accessible sites are around Parkachik in Suru where both rock formations and glaciers are found. Other potential sites include: Karboo-Drass; Pashkyum; Farooana; Purtikchey; and Sani in Zaskar.

Trekking

Age old trade routes criss-cross the District, connecting the region to Pahalgam, Kishtwar, Padder, Lahul and Spiti to the south, and Haniskote, Lamayuru, and Leh to the north. Examples of these treks are:

Panikhar to Pahalgam (6 days); Panikhar to Kishtwar (9 days); Tisuru-Rangum-Kangi-Hemis (7 days); Padum-Omasila-Kishtwar (6 days); Padum-Darche-Manali (9 days); Padum-Shingola-Nimu ('chadar' road, 9 days); Padum-Hemis-Leh (14 days).

There are also shorter and less frequented routes, such as Sankoo to Drass via Stakpa Umba; Barsoo to Sapi Pokar via Rousali; Sangra to Rangdum via Yunlungma and Namsura.

Hang gliding

Several spots have been identified that are suitable for hang gliding. These are Rgyal near Wakha; Parkachik in Suru; Stonzey near Kargil; and Sani in Zaskar.

Rafting

Both the Zaskar and Suru rivers offer good rafting. The Suru river originates from the Pensila and flows down the beautiful Suru valley to Kargil.

Stretches suitable for rafting are at Parkachik (3 km), Kochik to Damsna (12 km), and Sankoot to Kargil (40 km).

The Zaskar river is generally considered more suited for white water expeditions as it offers medium grade rafting starting from Akchoo to the confluence of Karcha. Roads follow the course of both rivers.

Skiing

There are several slopes with plenty of snow that are ideal for winter sports like skiing. Such slopes are found around Padum and at Kurbathang and Khumbuthang near Kargil.

Cultural tourism

As mentioned above, Kargil District boasts of a variety of ethnic groups and tribal cultures. A large number of historical sites and places of pilgrimage, including gonpas and hermitages are also found throughout the district.

The Suru valley is characterised by a unique cultural identity, and remnants of several influences are still present. For example, at K. Khar, an ancient village at the mouth of the Barsoo Nalla, there is a 7 metre tall rock sculpture of the future Buddha, Chamba, which testifies to the passage of Buddhist missionaries. The Suru valley also is famous for its rich flora, including many medicinal species.

The Drass valley has its own charm with a language totally different from the rest of Kargil district. A similar language is spoken in Gilgit and Astor, while the culture of the valley is a mixed Dard-Kashmiri one.

Sod-Batalik valley, down the Indus from Khaltse, is inhabited by a community of no more than a few thousand people. This community is believed to be of pure Indo-Aryan race and to have preserved their racial purity down the centuries. Their language is said to be akin to that spoken in Gilgit. Their unique characteristics suggest that they would be of great interests to anthropologists and ethnologists.

The Zaskar valley is one of the lesser known Buddhist kingdoms of the western Himalayas. Its inaccessibility and the esoteric nature of Buddhism as it is practiced here have provided the inhabitants with the freedom to preserve their cultural identity, making it one of the last surviving cultural satellites of Tibet.