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## Kargil: An Introduction to the District and the Youth Voluntary Forum

Mohammed Raza Abassi

Stretching like a lunar landscape high in the remote regions of the Karakoram, the Kargil plateau is situated on the banks of the river Suru at a height of 9,300 ft., midway between Srinagar and Leh. It has always been a distressing fact that in spite of being the second largest town of the Ladakh region, most people only think of Leh when they talk about Ladakh. The government's attitude has shown the same bias with the result that Leh alone got the maximum share of development and exposure to the outside world, while Kargil and its cultural heritage were ignored completely.

Today a quiet town, Kargil once served as an important trade and transit centre on the Central Asian trade routes. Caravans carrying exotic merchandise, such as silk brocades, carpets, felts, tea, poppies, ivory, etc., would pass through the town on their way to and from China, Tibet, Yarkand, and Kashmir. Caravanserais lined the road passing through the township, and the old bazaar displayed a variety of Central Asian and Tibetan commodities even after the cessation of the trade in 1949 until they were finally exhausted about two decades ago. In spite of its importance, due to political reasons in the name of Ladakhi identity, Kargil has always been overshadowed by Leh and its culture and attractions have remained unknown. Most tourists considered Kargil no more than a place to spend the night on their way to their destination, Leh.

The valley is inhabited by people of Tibeto-Balti and Tibeto-Dard origin, the majority being Purigpa who depend mostly on agriculture and some animal husbandry for their subsistence. The majority of the population is illiterate, by faith they are Muslims, although there is a minority of Buddhists in areas like Zaskar and Mulbekh. Winters in Kargil are harsh, with temperatures routinely dropping down to -30 or -35 degrees Celsius. Drass and Zaskar also receive heavy snowfalls, forcing people to be confined to their own homes for long periods. With the exception of the relatively lower

areas of Kargil proper, Batalik, Darchiks, Garkone and the Sanjak area of the Chiktan valley, the region is only capable of producing a single harvest. Wheat and barley are the main crops, while fruits like apricots, apples, and grapes grow in the lower areas. The soil in Kargil is very fertile and suitable for the cultivation of a variety of vegetables. The region has scanty rainfall, most of the agriculture relying on irrigation from the Suru river and its tributaries.

### Youth Voluntary Forum Kargil

In recent decades, the socio-cultural, political, and developmental system, as well as general morality and ethics have been in decline. The masses have been subjected to pressure from various sources, pulling them in many directions. These tensions threatened to cause a complete disintegration of the local society, which would result in the extinction of its identity, social values, traditions, and vitality.

In the midst of this confusion, the youth of Kargil in an effort to preserve our original social values and to ensure a fair development of the region, felt an urge to commit themselves to social work to prevent the masses from drifting into the national mainstream. Such an effort required different kinds of reformatory endeavours, and in order to translate these ideas into action, a non-religious, non-political, voluntary organisation was established.

YVFK was founded in 1990 and its first initiative was to donate their work to the refugees of the village of Kaksar. These refugees, because of Pakistani offensives, were forced to flee their village which lies near the Indo-Pak border, seeking shelter in Kargil. Since its initiation, the Forum has been formally registered with the government in 1992 under the Societies Registration Act VI of 1998 (AD 1941), and has steadily been expanding its activities ever since.

### Aims and objectives

The main purpose of the organisation is to guide and inspire the younger generation in this time of cultural confusion and educational chaos. In every possible way, YVFK strives to rebuild self-confidence among youngsters, especially students, in order to restore their lost identity in their own cultural roots. This, we believe, is the only way to save, preserve and strengthen the cultural heritage and unique identity of this land.

One of the most important areas that require attention is education, as the literacy rate in the district is a mere 19%, and only 3% among women. Atten-

tion needs to be given to educational development both at the governmental and popular levels. 'Modern' education has always proved very confusing to us. Every year about 90% of students fail in the 10th grade exams, yet no one has ever bothered to investigate the causes, and no one has ever challenged the relevance of this system of education. We certainly understand the importance of education in Kargil today, but we need a system of education which is more relevant to the lives of local people. It must be *worth* spending a quarter of their short lives in such a system of education, and such a system must be administered in a manner that is humane and sympathetic to local people. Therefore, we conduct free coaching classes for poor students during the winter vacations. In 1994-95 and 1995-96, we have been able to accommodate 320 students in these free classes. The success rate has been encouraging and more and more people are seeking to have their children admitted to these classes.

### Future plans

We are planning to start hostel facilities for students from the most remote areas of Kargil District, such as Rangdum in Zaskar, Surua Parkachik, and Sapi. In these far flung areas 98% of the population are illiterate and living conditions are extremely poor. We plan to select a few deserving students from these villages and send them to some private educational institutions in the town of Kargil. Obviously, such students would need to be provided with accommodation and with financial assistance to cover expenses for food, clothing, teaching materials, etc. We do recognise, however, that such a solution can only be a temporary one until we can establish better educational facilities in the villages themselves.

In general, we feel that it is very important for our people to be more informed about the whole question of development. In particular, we are keen to show the limitations and pitfalls of the conventional model of development. Through our work, we hope to encourage a new appreciation of our traditional way of life. In this regard, we promote the consumption of local products, collect information about traditional farming practices, and encourage people to plant more trees, so as to become less dependent on imports for their fuel and animal fodder requirements.

As the majority of the people in Kargil District live well below the poverty line, we are in great need of financial assistance from any individual or organisation who may be willing to help us to continue our voluntary activities for the upliftment of the poor people of this neglected region of Ladakh. We realise that Kargil is at a crossroads where it may either main-

tain its distinct culture and unique identity, or it will join the hundreds of other civilisations which have sunk into oblivion. YVFK is a manifestation of the awareness of Kargil's youth, a call for all to rise to the occasion and save our society from cultural and educational disaster.

Any suggestions and proposals would be highly appreciated, and we urge all who work for the upliftment of Ladakh to consider Kargil as well.

## The Trade in Pashm and Its Impact on Ladakh's History

*Janet Rizvi*

The perception that the trade in pashm had a decisive impact on Ladakh's political history is hardly an original one. Implicit in the analyses of Lamb and Huttenback,<sup>1</sup> it was worked out in detail by Datta,<sup>2</sup> who demonstrated convincingly that it was the hope of laying hands on the lucrative trade in shawl wool (pashm) that provided the motive for the Dogra invasion of Ladakh in 1834, as well as for the subsequent incursion into Tibet. Thus it was indirectly responsible for the configuration of the state of Jammu and Kashmir as it existed after 1846.

Lamb, Huttenback and Datta are more interested in the political implications of the trade than in the trade *per se*. It seems worthwhile, therefore, to attempt to supplement the insights they provide by making an analysis of the trade itself, insofar as it was documented before the Dogra invasion; and for a few decades after, till changing conditions robbed it of much of its importance. This is what the present paper sets out to do.

Throughout its history the Kashmir shawl industry has been totally dependent on the high-altitude pastures of Ladakh, Tibet and central Asia. Although in the last two decades of the twentieth century breeders using modern methods have been successful in producing 'cashmere' in the less extreme conditions of Scotland and Australia, the raw material of the Kashmir shawl has always come from the high pastures of inner Asia, whose peculiar environmental conditions were ideal for stimulating its growth. The word 'pashm' refers to the raw unprocessed wool as it comes from the body

1. Lamb 1960 and Huttenback 1961.

2. Datta, 1970; 1973.