

A war ravaged Kargil district: its implications on their common population

Fayaz Hussain

Research Scholar (History) Panjab University, Chandigarh

Abstract

The present paper is mostly based on primary sources; especially interviews taken from eye witnessed elderly people during my four month fieldwork in Kargil district. It will discuss four wars of India and Pakistan, especially fought within Kargil and its peripheries. The socio, economic and psychological impact on the people of Kargil will be highlighted during these wars. Human grievances during war will be the main aspect of present paper. Before discussing about the war and its impact on the people of Kargil. I will give a brief account of the geographical, demographic and socio-cultural features of Kargil Ladakh.

Kargil is situated approximately between 30° to 35' North latitude and 75° to 77' in the East-West longitude, ranges from 8000 to 23000 feet above the sea level. It is surrounded by Srinagar, Barmullah, and Doda in the South-West, Leh in the East, Himachal Pradesh in the South and Pakistan occupied Kashmir in the North-West.¹ The racial stocks of Kargilis are Dard (Indo-Aryan), Tibeto-Mangolioids and Arguns (*off-springs of the union between Ladakhi women and Kashmir or Yarkandi fathers*). The ethnic tribes are *Brogpas, Baltis, Purigis, Shinas* and Ladakhis. The languages spoken in the region are *Purigi, Shina, Balti* and *Ladakhi*. The *Balti* and *Shina* languages are written in Urdu script, which is common in the area.² In 1979 when the reorganization of the districts was

carried out in Jammu and Kashmir, the Ladakh district was divided into two full fledged district of Leh and Kargil.³

The high peaks of *Namikala* and *Penzila* are called the sky pillars of the Kargil. Physically, the whole of district is mountainous with many parallel ranges of trans-Himalayas; The Zanskar, Karakoram, Nun-Kun and the Ladakh. Between these ranges the Suru, Indus, Shingo and Kanji rivers flow in the valley where most of the population lives. Kargil lies on the rain shadow side of the Himalayan where dry monsoon winds reaches Kargil after being robbed of its moisture in plains and the Himalayan mountain. The district combines the condition of both arctic and desert climate. The two passes *Zojila* and *Fotulla* situated at the height of 3567 and 4192 meters above the sea level are called Gateways from Kashmir Valley and Leh for entry in Kargil District. The land surface of Kargil district can be broadly divided into upper zone above 4000 meters and lower zone between 2500 meters to 3000 meters (approximately). In upper zone most of the land surface is almost unfit for any vegetative growth or human settlements. Only limited land surface between 4000 meters to 4500 meters has few pastures and allow pastorals activities of rudimentary type. In the lower zone, narrow oasis like valleys, alluvial fans, where soil cover is reasonable thick, slopes are gentler or land can be cut into terraces for cultivation and

with a short summer season perennial or snow fed streams in the vicinity.⁴

Agriculture and habitations in Kargil is mostly confined to the river valleys such as Suru valley, Indus valley, Chiktan valley, Drass valley, Wakha-Mulbekh valley and Zanskar valley. Some villages are also situated on the low lying mountain slopes, and in and around the rivers are Baroo, Poyen, Shilikchay, Goma Kargil, Karkitchoo, Hardas and Hundurman villages. In these villages large cultivation of apricot and apple can be made due to its stable temperature.

As the census 2001 of Kargil, out of 119,307, the 95,963 (80.43%) were Muslims, 17875 (14.98%) were Buddhists, 5142 (4.30%) were Hindus, 227 (0.23%) were Sikhs, 71 (0.04%) and were Christians. In addition, over 29 (0.02%) professing other religions and faiths. Shia Muslim has been professed by majority of the population in Kargil

1948 and 1971 wars against Pakistan, and local people of Kargil

Kargil became part of Jammu and Kashmir, state after the Independence in 1947. In 1948, Jammu and Kashmir war Pakistan deliberately tried to enlarge the area of conflict. In a bold and wide sweep, Pakistani, army struck simultaneously at Drass and Kargil, and had been heading towards Leh. Many parts of Kargil had thus fallen into Gilgiti raiders hand. In bid to free Kargil from Pakistani raiders, 1 Patiala battalion took of the defense of Zojila pass with a company of 6 Jammu and Kashmir infantry. 1 Patiala, under the spirited

command of Lt. Col. Sukhdev Singh, fought a series of successful actions against the enemy, during its six months-stay at harsh pass of Zojila. In a significant operation, competently planned and heroically executed, the Indian troops had broken the Pakistani stronghold over Zojila pass just eighty kilometers away from Kargil town, on November 1, 1948, with almost super human effort. Indian army conducted tank operations beyond 11500 feet and fighting with severe cold temperature about minus 30 degree. The victory was quickly exploited with moving further to recaptured Drass area on 16 November and main Kargil on 23 November, 1948, from where the enemy had fled.⁵

Indian Army and Civil administration every year celebrated 'Kargil Day' on 23 November, to commemorate the bravery of soldiers. In 1948 War, thousands local people of Kargil had made human-chain to pave the way for soldiers' moment in extremely freezing season of November. However, mainland fellow Indians hardly knew about all these it had been a hard fought battle, with that Kargil and Leh had saved. However, other important territories of Gilgit (now Pakistan occupied Kashmir) and Baltistan (now Pakistan occupied Kashmir) could not be retrieved and remained under the occupation of Pakistan.

During the 1971 Indo-Pak War, a couple of villages were part of the area where the Indian Army had made advances. The response of the people of these villages towards the Indian troops, as also the civil administration, was sufficient indication of their sense of relief on having become part of India again.⁶ In Kargil sector, Indian troops in succeeding in capturing in some important enemy posts overlooking Kargil

town. In some extent removed the threat to Srinagar-Kargil-Leh National Highway (NH1). Hundurman village of Kargil had retrieved by Indian army in 1971 from Pakistani occupation. Lamenting and expressing her anguish and pain seventy year old woman Abi Kulsum, a native of the same village, she said: “I have left all my family members in other side in Pakistan after 1971 war, my father died there, she further adds Pakistan army tyrannized and looted our properties, cattle had slaughtered for food and even played with the modesty of women, contrary to that Indian army was supportive, helpful and disciplined they never did wrongs”.⁷

The Pakistani shelling from across the Line of control (LoC) assumed serious proportions during 1998 and rose to a crescendo in the autumn of that year. In 1998 cross border shelling had left 17 dead in Kargil town. They have targeted the main commercial establishments of the district. Many Shops, houses, schools, religious places, army camps and infrastructure had damaged. The artillery firing by Pakistani army had mainly been in Kargil. Talking with Times of India news paper the then Chief of the Army Staff General Ved Prakash Malik, said: “the Pakistanis are firing in Kargil area to scare away the local population, most of whom are Shias”.⁸

1999 Kargil war: Its impact on Kargili people

The 1999 war was a different story, one which transformed war into a household name all over India. In the winter of 1998-99, due to lapse in Indian military intelligence, Pakistani army had infiltrated

into Indian territories of the line of control in the Drass and Batalik sectors. It was not until in May 1999 that the Indian military authorities recognized the gravity of situation. When the two local shepherd’ brothers Murup Tsering and Tashi Namgayal had informed army. They have never held a gun or fought intruders, yet their contribution to limit border intrusion had not to be ignored. Both of these brothers first spotted the Pakistani intruders when the government had no clue about the intrusion. Recounting the days when Indian army was unaware of the intrusion. Tsering says: “on May 2, my brother Tashi heading to Garkaun Nala (stream) to look after our cattle. He came back running and said he had spotted a trail in the snow. This was very unusual as nobody goes there. The brothers picked up a pair of binoculars and rushed to the stream on Jubar hills. We could clearly make out six to seven dressed in *Salwaar-Kameezs*. We were not sure if they were not from Indian army” he says. The two informed the Indian army post and reported the matter.⁹

The lives of thousands of its residents could not remain untouched by the enormity of the Kargil war. Large number of the residents’ men, women and children had to face displacement and had to leave their villages for safety and shelter. The effect was dreadful on the entire population of Kargil. Volatile border situation which followed after Kargil war on the Line of Control between India and Pakistan in Kargil district between 1999 shattered the lives of people living in the border district of Kargil. Ali a local native of Baroo, village of Kargil a worst effected village he says “in 1999, Pakistani army bombardment hits a five

ammunition depots army it was situated in our village, horror created within minutes the sophisticated rockets, bombs started to explode within the depots, Civil district government and army evacuated thousands of villagers, death loomed over Kargil in the form of Pakistani bombardments for these years. He further adds, we had been facing two threats one from Pakistani bombardments second the arms exploded in army depot within our village, it continued three days and devastated our houses and hundreds of houses got cracked, barley and wheat fields, apricot and apple orchards our whole economy was ruined in three months war, may Almighty saved us from such catastrophic event”.¹⁰

On any normal day, every afternoon these shells would chase its residents into underground bunkers. As soon as the Kargilis would hear the big bangs, they had rushed for safety, some in the bunkers, some in the safe locations and others would simply flee the town. Pakistani army shells would pound the entire Kargil region with a ferocious intensity, hitting innocent people, shops, schools and hospitals.¹¹

The civilian also played very important role in the war. The people of Kargil fought along with the Indian army, besides carrying loads to daunting heights for about four months. Many civilians had killed in firings and thousands had been sustained injuries, property worth millions of rupees destroyed. The people staying in border areas were angry with the intruders; they felt they have disturbed the peace and tranquility of the region by shelling and gunfire. They accuse the Pakistani government with damaging their economy and social life. Economy of

about 50 villages in Batalik sector east of Kargil district, which was based apple and apricot production, had ruined. Villagers were unable to harvest because of the continues shelling, the education of their children had also suffered.¹²

Ghulam Mohammad a resident of Bhimbat village Drass, remembering those miserable days he says: “In 1999 Kargil War, we lost two people from our village during shelling named Jaffar and Mohammad. Government forcefully displaced us hundreds of kilometers away from our village for about four months. Besides, that hundreds of animals, especially cows, horses, cattle and mules of our fellow villagers killed by Pakistani shelling. The education of school going students effected, due to turmoil, depression and psychiatric and heart diseases cases increased in the region, especially among the children and females. In Bhimbat village hundreds of households damaged and cracked due to thousands of shells attack from Pakistan”.¹³

About 27000, residents who fled their homes from forty nine villages in Kargil district when the war broke out. They had fled leaving their standing crops, livestock and valuables. After four months, they have returned. The crops have dried up, in certain fields burnt by shells, thousands of livestock had perished, and hundreds of homes have developed cracks. In Drass sector education of children had badly affected due to closure of schools. Due to chemicals of various types of weapons used in war the trees infected. National media both electronic and print media had too ignored the grievances of civilians only highlighted the military achievements.

In main Kargil towns biggest district hospital was shifted about 50 km away from city, private schools closed for three months, business establishments deserted for almost six months in Kargil town. The government establishments destroyed such as a , Petrol pumps, Academy of art and culture office, Jawahar novadiya Vidhiyala School and Deputy Commissioner Office damaged roads were cuts from one village to other villages and crimes increased due to huge public displacement. Whole district was divided into various segments to help Indian army as a porter to move logistics from base camp to various high altitude military posts. Local Kargili people had never said no to army to help them as could as they can. However, civilians had blamed administration that they did not provided relief materials which they were deserved.

Ali Mussa a resident of Kharbu village which is 24 kilometers from Kargil town, he said: “I had 30 goats, two cows, 1 ox and one yak when I fled the village on the morning of May-13. He further said when came back after two months my home I had recovered only five goats and one cow from mountains”.

During the three months of arduous fighting, the Indian army gradually succeeding to recapture its territories from Pakistani troops. Pakistan finally agreed to withdraw its army insisting to the last that these were ‘militants’ or ‘*mujahideen*’ though it was well established that regular units of the Pakistan Army were involved.¹⁴

The Indian Army also reportedly deployed 300 artillery pieces, including 100 heavy Bofor guns. The IAF logged 550 strike missions, 150 scouting missions and 500 escort missions. Besides, 2,185 chopper

sorties were also conducted. The cost of the conflict in monetary terms, for India, has been projected at Rs. 11.1 billion. In terms of manpower, the most precious national resource, and 407 soldiers were killed, 584 injured and 6 missing. Pakistani casualties were estimated to be at 696 killed.¹⁵ Kargil has caused India a lot of anguish; it has also stirred its soul. Kargil can now become a defining moment, a watershed and a new beginning, spreading a beacon to the new avenues and opportunities that lie before this nation.

References

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⁶ <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultlines/volume4/Fault4-BloeriaF.htm>

⁷ I took interview Abi Kulsum, Age 68, native of Hundurman village Kargil, on 14 September, 2014.

⁸ *Times of India*, 1 July, 1998, p. 13.

⁹ *Ibid*, 1999, p.9.



¹⁰ I have interviewed, Apo Ali, 72 years of age, from native of Kargil, during my fieldwork in August 2015.

¹¹ Kavita Suri, *Women Empowerment, Conflict Transformation and Social Change in Kargil*, International Journal of Social Science Volume, 2 no. 2, December 2013, pp. 119-127.

¹² *Times of India*, 25 June, 1999.

¹³ I took Interview from Ghulam Mohmad, Age 62, native of Drass Kargil, in 10-July 2015.

¹⁴ Janet Rizvi, op.cit. Pp.100-01.

¹⁵ Swapan Das Gupta, *India Today*, 26 July 1999, p. 32.