

# Women Empowerment, Conflict Transformation and Social Change in Kargil

Kavita Suri

Associate Professor/Assistant Director, Department of Lifelong Learning (Formerly,  
Centre for Adult, Continuing Education & Extension)  
University of Jammu, J&K, India  
**Email:** snowy132@rediffmail.com

## Abstract

Ladakh is a high altitude cold desert located in the northernmost part of the border state of Jammu and Kashmir. The region comprises of two districts-Leh and Kargil. While Leh is dominated by Buddhists, Kargil district is dominated by Shias Muslims. Kargil remains cut off from rest of the country for almost seven months i.e. November to May, as the only lifeline from Kargil to Srinagar remains snowbound due to heavy snowfall and extreme coldness of temperature at -40°C to -50°C. Kargil district which is situated close to the Line of Control (LoC) is a remote, rugged and geographically isolated region in Ladakh. Most of the inhabitants of Kargil are indulging in traditional farming in the river belts combined with herding and animal husbandry as the primary occupation for their livelihood. Kargil has been affected badly due to Kargil conflict between India and Pakistan in 1999.

The present paper focuses on the winds of change that are transforming the lives of the women of this conservative and orthodox Shia Muslim dominated region. The paper would explore as to how in the post-1999 era after Kargil war after facing the trauma of war and displacement, life returned to normal for the thousands of Kargil residents especially its women. The paper also seeks to explore the changes brought about by projects like Operations Sadbhavana for the empowerment of Kargili women by the India army and how it is helping in conflict transformation.

© 2013 New Delhi Publishers. All rights reserved

**Keywords:** Women, Kargil, conflict, empowerment, conflict transformation

Ladakh is a high altitude cold desert located in the northernmost part of the border state of Jammu and Kashmir. The region comprises of two districts-Leh and Kargil. While Leh is dominated by Buddhists, Kargil district is dominated by Shias Muslims. Located at a distance of 204 kms from Srinagar in the west and 234 kms from Leh in the east, Kargil is the second largest urban centre of Ladakh and headquarters of the district of same name. The world famous Zojila Pass 13000 ft. on Srinagar Leh national Highway is the only means linking the district from the state and rest of the country through road journey during the five months of summer i.e June to October.

For the remaining seven months i.e. November to May, the district remains totally cutoff from other parts due to closure of the pass as a result of heavy snowfall and extreme coldness of temperature at -40°C to -50°C. Kargil district which is situated close to the Line of Control (LoC) is a remote, rugged and geographically isolated region in Ladakh.

A quite town now, Kargil once served as important trade and transit centre in the Pan-Asian trade network. Numerous caravans carrying exotic merchandise comprising silk, brocade, carpets, felts, tea, poppy, ivory etc. transited in the town on their way to and from China, Tibet, Yarkand and Kashmir. The ancient trade route passing through the township was lined with several caravanserais. Now, since 1975, travelers of numerous nationalities have replaced traders of the past and Kargil has regained its importance as a centre of travel-related activities. Believed to be the first to be inhabited by the regions early colonizers-the Indo Aryans, Mons from across the great Himalayans range assorted the Dard Immigrants from down the Indus and the Gilgit valleys and Itinerant nomads from the Tibetan island, it touches it boundaries with Baltistan, Kashmir, Kishtwar etc.

#### **Administrative divisions and set up**

The frontier district of Kargil in J&K falling under the scheduled tribe (ST) category is presently administrated by a local Autonomous Hill Development Council under the Chairmanship of Chief Executive Councilor. The District Development Commissioner acts as Chief Executive Officer for the Council. The sub-district level administration is run by a sub-divisional magistrate in case of a sub division and by a Naib Tehsildar in case of a Block. The district has two tehsils namely Kargil and Zanskar. Tehsil Zanskar and Dras are two administrative sub divisions. The district has 129 revenue villages including two non inhabited villages in Dras. Tehsil Kargil is comprised of 104 villages whereas Zanskar has 25 revenue villages. The district has 65 Panchayat covering 127 villages. There are 9 community development blocks at sub district level these are Dras, Kargil, Shakar Chiktan, Shargole, Gund Mangal Pora, Sankoo, Taisure, Zanskar and Lungnaq.

**Table 1:** Administrative set up of Kargil

Name of the District	Name of the Tehsil	Name of the Blocks
Kargil	Kargil	Kargil
	Kargil	Dras
	Kargil	Shargole
	Kargil	Shakar-Chiktan
	Kargil	Sankoo
	Kargil	Gund Mangal Pora
	Kargil	Taisuru
	Zanskar	Zanskar.
	Zanskar	Lungnak

**Table 2:** Administrative divisions in Kargil

Si.No.	Name of the Block	No. of the Panchayats	No. of Villages
1.	Kargil	13	22
2.	Drass	11	20
3.	Shargole	05	15
4.	Shakar-Chiktan	07	11
5.	Sankoo	9	10
6.	GM Pora	5	9
7.	Taisuru	06	17
8.	Zanskar	05	16
9.	Lungnak	4	9
Total		65	129

**Table 3:** Population of Kargil

S.No	Year	Person	Male	Female	No. of female per 1000 Male
1.	1981	65,992	35,609	30,383	853
2.	1991	81,067	43,164	37,903	878
3.	2001	1,15,227	60,629	54,598	837
4.	2011	143,388	80,791	62,597	775

As per Census report of 2011, the population of the district is 1,43,388 souls which includes 80791 males and 62597 females .During the decades of 1971-81 the population growth was 23.58% against 29.69% in the state. The decadal growth of Kargil in 1981-91 was 30.85% against 28.92% in the state. During the year 1991, no proper census could take place in Jammu and Kashmir State due to disturbance. The estimated population of the district for 1991 given by the expert committee constituted by the Govt. of India is 81,069 souls with decadal growth rate of 30.85 % .The decadal growth of 1991-2001 is +31.39%.

### ***Occupational set up***

Most of the inhabitants of Kargil are indulging in tradition farming in the river belts combined with herding and animal husbandry as the primary occupation for their livelihood. However with the passage of time, developmental and conceptual changes took place and the people found secondary occupations like preaching and teaching and few other government jobs, masonry, agricultural labour, casual labour for army etc. According to Census 2001, 74.22 % of the total population is of cultivator and 95% of the population in villages is totally dependent on agriculture and livestock. Therefore the socio economic condition of the people is not so sound as compared to other district of the State. The working season for the people of the district is only 5 to 6 months. During this short period the people grow wheat, Barley and fodder known as “Alfa-Alfa”.

**Table 4:** Working force in Kargil

S. No	Category	Number	Percentage
1.	Cultivators	22,204	74.22
2.	Agriculture Labour	973	3.25
3.	Livestock and allied activities	300	1.00
4.	Mining & quarrying	7	0.02
5.	Manufacturing & Processing	245	0.82
6.	House Hold Industry	79	0.27
7.	Construction	676	2.26
8.	Trade and Commerce	490	1.64
9.	Transport and Communication	295	0.99
10.	Other Services	4647	15.33
	Total	29,916	100.00

### **Kargil Conflict and its impact on women**

Kargil has remained a trouble-torn region since 1947. The district witnessed clashes between India and Pakistan during the partition in 1947. It was again the epicenter of India-Pak clashes in 1999 when Pakistan breached the Line of Control following which a major war broke out in Kargil between the two rival countries. Entire Kargil region including the areas like Dras, Matayan, Mushko valley, Batalik etc were badly hit by the conflict which continued for over two months and over 500 army soldiers and officers were killed in the action on the high altitudes of this region. The lives of hundreds and thousands of its inhabitants could not remain untouched by the magnitude of the Kargil war. Most of the residents including the women and children had to face displacement and had to leave their houses and villages for safety and shelter. The effect was devastating 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 and 2003 shattered the lives of people living in the border district of Kargil. Death loomed over Kargil in the form of Pakistani shells for these years. 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'd rush 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. It also saw standing crops over hundreds of acres of land close to the border lost and an unknown number of cattle die in border crossfire and for want of fodder.

Kargil has witnessed drastic changes in post-1999 era. After having faced the trauma of war and displacement, life returned to normal for thousands of Kargil residents slowly and gradually. The ceasefire between India and Pakistan that came into force on the borders of Jammu and Kashmir in November 2003 has heralded positive changes in the lives of the people of the border region of Kargil. After having faced

the trauma of war and displacement, life returned to normal for the thousands of Kargil residents. Since then, many developments have taken place in the region. Many developments have taken place in the region. The IT revolution has touched the lives, evident from the mushrooming Computer Centres and expanding network of Army Goodwill Schools (AGS) in the entire district. The most prominent and positive change visible in this conservative orthodox region is that its conservative Shia girls and women who are coming out in large numbers for economic empowerment.

### **Conflict transformation, Op Sadbhavna and women empowerment in Kargil**

Kargil district has traditionally remained a very conservative district. The girls are not encouraged by the conservative community in Kargil, since it implies stepping out of the house. Kargil has no tradition of women working at jobs that give them some degree of economic independence. Although women work hard at home, and look after agricultural fields and livestock, they rarely have any cash in hand to call their own.

Womenfolk form the backbone of any society. Indian Army has been making efforts to connect this remote region with the mainland. Twelve years ago, under Operation Sadbhavna (Project Goodwill), it devised projects for promotion of primary education, vocational training, empowerment of women, horticulture, adult literacy, community development and health care centres etc. The project by Army aimed at all round and sustainable development of this region.

Operation Sadbhavna has succeeded in kindling the yearning for self-sufficiency amongst the womenfolk of the area. It enabled them to voluntarily participate in various courses run by the Women Empowerment Centre, Kargil. It has been imparting training to the young girls in tailoring, carpet weaving, knitting and computers. Inaugurated in December 2000 by the 14 Corps Commander, Lieutenant-General Arjun Ray, the Women's Empowerment Centre (WEC) in Kargil is at the cutting edge of social change in the highly-conservative mountain region. Funded by the Indian Army, the WEC runs job training courses for women. At any given time, almost a hundred students learn a variety of skills, ranging from computers to carpet weaving, knitting and embroidery. Some of the students are graduates; others have just a few years of school education behind them.

Opened in immediate post-Kargil era, this Women Empowerment Centre in fact, opened the doors for the women of the region to do something different in their lives. Many Muslim girls also actively took part in the sweeping change of Kargil.

Kargil is a very conservative society. When army set up WEC and other Welfare Centres, the response was very poor as the Kargil residents looked at it with suspicion. But slowly and gradually, dozens of Shia Muslim girls witnessed the winds of change sweeping Kargil and became part of it. For those Kargili women whose personal circumstances did not allow them to attend the Welfare Centres regularly but were keen to earn a living or supplement their husbands' meagre earnings, the Army took

innovative steps. A team of eight experts from Himalayan Environmental Studies and Conservation Organization (HESCO), an organization based in Dehradun, was invited to Kargil to conduct a course here that trained 46 women from across the region in the preparation and preservation of items like agarbatti/ dhoop, jam, squash, pickles, baking of biscuits using local resources. This has enabled the trained women to initiate commercial activities from their homes. In addition, innovative vocations like candle making, basket weaving, biscuit baking, food processing, block printing etc have also been added to the slew of activities already underway.

The WECs not only empower women of remote Kargil areas by training them in knitting, weaving, tailoring, embroidery, carpet weaving etc. and making them self reliant, but also pay the trainees during the period of training. Such activities contribute to making available opportunities for the women of this area to generate additional income for their families and partake in decision-making at village level.

Kargil is divided into seven blocks, namely Kargil, Drass, Sankoo, Taisuru, Shargole, Shakar-Chiktan and Zanskar. In Dras, the second coldest inhabited place on the earth after Siberia where the minimum temperature recorded is – 60 degree Celsius, the WEC Dras, called Zaito Empowerment Centre, caters to the women of the area who want to earn their independence. Girls from neighbouring areas like Muradbagh, Holial and Goshan also come to learn vocational skills. The Women Empowerment Centres at Kargil and Dras have helped in widening the vision of women besides enhancing their self confidence.

For the six months' period of winter, when the Zojila Pass, the gateway to the frontier region of Ladakh, gets blocked due to heavy snowfall, the Women Empowerment Centres and Adult Literacy Centres help the local women considerably. In addition to picking up vocational skills and selling their products like shawls, sweaters, Bal Kalavas etc at the Centres, they also learn how to read and write. Women can weave a small carpet or do embroidery over a shawl that can fetch them anything from Rs 150 to Rs 1000. Besides, the WEC products like mufflers, gloves, Bal Clavas (monkey caps) and woolen socks are purchased by the families of the soldiers and officers. These are also put on sale in the Cooperative melas organized by AWWA (Army Wives Welfare Association).

As part of its Goodwill project, the army also organizes visits for the girls of Women Employment Centre in order to expose them to the rich cultural heritage to various parts of the country including golden triangle of Delhi, Agra and Jaipur, Taj Mahal, Agra Fort, Dayalbagh, Fatehpur Sikri, Bharatpur etc. Many girls and women from Kargil have been to various parts of the country in Army sponsored tours. The prime objective of the tour is to foster national integration and provide an opportunity for young students to visit various historical and cultural cities in the country. Most of these girls and women have traveled outside Kargil for the first time in their lives. Many have seen even train for the first time. Living in those remote hamlets situated close to the Line of Control, such visits are quite memorable and learning experiences for all such women.

### **Women entrepreneurs of Kargil**

Initiatives such as these Empowerment Centres are undoubtedly helping the women of this Shia Muslim-dominated area break the shackles imposed by conservative traditional norms. Scores of Shia girls are now gradually stepping out to learn vocational skills. Although a few conservative Shias continue to resist these changes, the younger lot is quite excited about the developmental projects. More and more women of Kargil now taste some degree of economic independence.

Many trained women have successfully turned entrepreneurs and are gainfully employed. Through Empowerment Centres, they are trying to make a living and educate their children. Several have set up their own businesses. Many girls started their own boutiques after being trained in tailoring or even started stitching clothes commercially, while many others have obtained jobs through the state and central schemes launched for the rural people.

Kargil, today can see Individuals change, structural changes and changes in power equation due to women empowerment initiatives. The same women who were resisted by men to even step out of their houses even have become actors for change, are able to analyze their own lives, make their own decisions and take their own actions. How the winds of change are sweeping across the conservative Kargil can well be gauged from the fact that today hundreds of girls from Kargil district are seen studying in various colleges and schools of Jammu province besides Jammu University which was not possible till just ten years ago. More stress is now being given on the education of girls in Kargil. The Kargil Autonomous Hill Development Council, constituted in 2003, now places special emphasis on the promotion of girls' enrolment in schools. Recognizing education as a crucial component of any change process, many schools have been opened in Kargil and girls are being encouraged to study.

Women of Kargil have become empowered in terms of their awareness, skills, knowledge, confidence and experience. Women of Kargil today are able to challenge the routines, conventions, laws, family forms, kinship structures and taken-for-granted behaviors that shape their lives – the accepted forms of power and how these are perpetuated. Its result is also seen in the number of women who are becoming politically aware and have even contested elections of Kargil Hill Council. What has been the most important aspect of this change is the changing power equation between orthodox Kargili men and women. They have formed new relations with other social actors, form coalitions and developed mutual support in order to negotiate, be agents of change, alter structures and so realize rights, dignity and livelihood security. For the first time, a Kargili girl has cracked All India Civil Services exam and has become first IAS officer from Kargil in 2012. Kargil has started to change and women empowerment is contributing significantly to it.

### **The way forward**

Women empowerment and conflict transformation through projects like Op Sadhbhavana have proved to be the primary tools of change in the region and thus also for conflict prevention has made those dreams a reality. More and more such initiatives need to be taken by the state and centre government, the civil society and non-governmental organizations for involving more and more women and girls in the process of social change and conflict transformation.

As more and more Kargili women are opening up to the changes around them, they want their children to get educated in good schools like the Goodwill schools which are better than the government schools. If such initiatives run successfully, they can prove to be a sound strategy for conflict prevention and ensure peace in Ladakh and pave way for “war prevention”, not “winning wars”.

Much needs to be done in women’s education, the health sector and improvement of roads and infrastructure. Several projects like women’s empowerment centres, adult literary centres, medical aid facilities, etc. have appreciably been launched by the Army’s 15 Crops that was raised after the Kargil war.

### **References**

- Aggarwal, R. 2004. *Beyond Lines of Control: Performance and politics on the disputed borders of Ladakh, India*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.
- Angmo, S. 1999. Women’s Development in Ladakh. In M. van Beek, K. B. Bertelsen, & P. Pedersen (Eds.), *Ladakh: Culture, History, and Development between Himalaya and Karakoram*. Oxford, U.K.: Aarhus University Press.
- Chakraborty, Proshun, “Running is a way of expressing for Kargil girls”, The Times of India, 31 January 2011
- Choudhury, Deba Prosad. 1996. *Trade and Politics in the Himalaya-Karakoram Borderlands*. Mumbai: Orient Longman Ltd
- Chwang, D. 1986 Ladakh: Culture and Tradition. In K.N. Pandit (Ed.), *Ladakh, Life & Culture* Srinagar, Kashmir: Centre of Central Asian Studies, University of Kashmir.
- Fazili, Ehsan. 2005. “Kargil revisited-II, Demand to open Kargil-Askardoo road,” The Tribune.
- Gupta, Prakriiti, 2009. “Kashmir’s borderline women live in ‘abode of ghosts’, Women’s Feature Service.
- Hay, K. E. 1997. Gender, Modernization, and Change in Ladakh, India. In M. van Beek, K. B. Bertelsen, & P. Pedersen (Eds.), *Ladakh: Culture, History, and Development between Himalaya and Karakoram*. Oxford, U.K. Aarhus University Press
- Jamwal, S.D.S., and TL Thangspa 2010, *Ladakh: Travel, History, Culture*. Jammu: Ingraphix Publications.
- Jina, Prem Singh. 1995. *Famous Western Explorers to Ladakh*. Leh, Ladakh: Central Institute for Buddhist Studies.
- Kaul, S. and Kaul, H.N. 1992. *Ladakh Through the Ages: Toward a New Identity*. New Delhi, India: Indus Publishing Company.
- Norberg-Hodge, H. 1991. *Ancient Futures - Learning from Ladakh*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
- One-to-one interviews with army officers, civilian populations and Kargil women in Kargil and Dras in 2001, 2003, 2007 and 2009

- Pirie, Fernanda. 2007. *Peace and Conflict in Ladakh: The Construction of a Fragile Web of Order*. PhD Thesis, Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill
- Rizvi, J. 2004 1996. *Ladakh – Crossroads of High Asia*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
- Rizvi, J. 2001 1999. *Trans-Himalayan Caravans – Merchant Princes and Peasant Traders in Ladakh*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
- Swami, Parveen, “Army spearheads social change in Kargil, The Hindu, 12 March, 2004
- Suri Kavita, 2007. “Conflict-hit Kargil women turn entrepreneurs”, Charkha Feature Service.
- Sharma, Sant, 2008. Kargil shows the way, India News and Feature Alliance (INFA).