

Saving Kalash valleys

Farhat Gul highlights UNESCO's efforts to protect indigenous cultures in Pakistan

The origins of the people of the Kalash Valleys are surrounded in mystery, and many theories abound regarding them. Some Kalashas have even claimed to be descended from Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, and the son of Zeus. It is commonly believed, however, that they are of Aryan descent, perhaps originating from those soldiers of Alexander the Great who settled in the area after his conquests of the north of India.

The culture of the Kalashas has always been unique, and their original religion was a pagan one. They were called Kafirs because of this, and hence their land was known as Kafiristan. In 1895, Amir Abdur Rehman, the ruler of Afghanistan, conquered the Kafirs and compelled them to convert to Islam. Those who escaped into what are the Kalash Valleys, in the Chitral area, retained their original beliefs, though many of them have now become Muslims.

Farhat Gul describes UNESCO's role in encouraging the Kalashas to improve their environment.

UNESCO's presence in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the organization's engagement with the Kalash valleys, its people and its culture are long-standing. Ten years ago, it was a delight to see the untouched and pure beauty of the Kalasha's natural and cultural heritage, whereas, on the other hand, the pathetic living conditions of this ethnic minority called for urgent measures to address issues

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Joshi festival



Mapping being done with the help of the local community

of poverty, illiteracy and the lack of basic health facilities. Communities, particularly young people, of the Kalash Valleys were mobilized by UNESCO and urged to take pride in their cultural heritage and use it as a tool for development. A mobile exhibition of Kalash artifacts was then organized by UNESCO Islamabad, in collaboration with the Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. This preliminary interaction with the simple, hospitable Kalashas was necessary to inculcate in them a sense of ownership for their culture, and pride in their identity.

Over the last ten years, there has been a gradual awakening of this beautiful ethnic group towards its social and cultural rights. They have an ancient and intricate history, stretching back to the time of Alexander the Great's invasion of India. The Kalash must now fight against poverty and oppression. There are local NGOs such as the Kalash Indigenous Survival Programme (KISP) working towards preserving and developing Kalash and its culture. Headed by a young Kalash lady from Rumbur Valley, Lakshan Bibi, who understands the cultural sensitivity of the region, KISP seeks to develop a long-term, integrated, culturally sensitive development programme for the Kalash people. Last year, while UNESCO was carrying out cultural mapping in the Kalash Valleys, Lakshan invited the project team to her house in



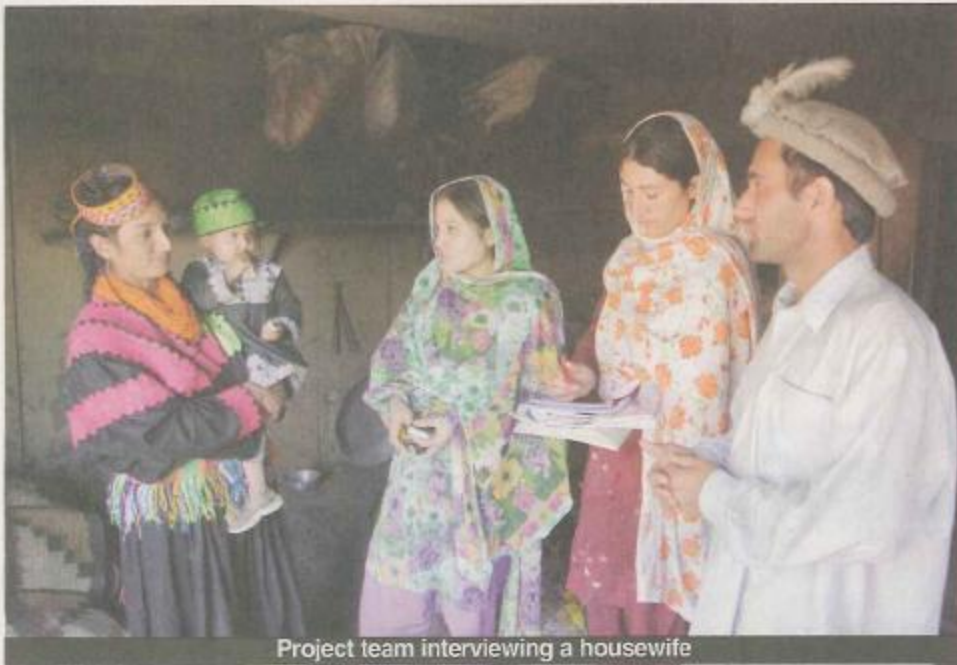
Home-based business

Rumbur, which is a beautiful combination of the modern and the traditional. She took the female members of the team to the *bashalinis*, which are exclusive abodes, where women stay during their menstrual period and following childbirth, and where men and visitors are not allowed. Although this custom has been much criticized by outsiders, Lakshan explained that women are isolated not because they are considered impure, but rather because they need their own space and privacy, which is not possible given the traditional Kalash family structure and way of life. Lakshan is constructing a few *bashalinis* close to her home, with all basic amenities, which women would need during their stay. These structures are more airy and cheerful than the ones constructed earlier, and have living areas where women can engage in activities pertaining to their particular interests such as needlework and stitching.

However, Lakshan laments that: "Economic activity has started in order to facilitate tourists, without keeping in view the cultural distortion it brings along with it. Mega restaurants have started to pop up everywhere, and the life patterns of people have started to change, as one can see tin roofs and disposable items being used in households. Along with the activities of businessmen, one can observe the invasion of rich investors who can buy land easily in these

areas, and have absolute autonomy to do whatever they want on that land. Bumburate, one of the Kalash Valleys, is becoming a business hub of the area and looks no different from any other hill station in Pakistan. There is a potential danger that the independent market mechanism will deprive the people of their own resources and will further reduce them to destitution. Natural resource management and use is the most fundamental way of the Kalasha's livelihood, but the investors from NWFP and Punjab are flowing in, and it is foreseen that the mountains will be purchased for resorts, and waters will be polluted by litter and waste. Even now middle men from Chitral have bought most of the dry fruit trees and sold the products in cities at high prices. The locals will not benefit from their resources until they are provided with institutional safeguards so that they can negotiate."

It needs to be emphasized that UNESCO has been present in the region since 2002 and has had successive projects in the Kalash Valleys since then. There have been times when projects overlapped each other, such as UNESCO's regional project, "Development of Cultural and Eco-tourism in the Mountainous Areas of Central and South Asia", which took off in 2003 and concluded in December 2007. This project overlapped with the Norway-funded project, "Mapping of the Cultural Assets in NWFP", which started



Project team interviewing a housewife



Taking pride in traditional practices

in May 2007 and is ongoing. The first project focused on community-based cultural activities and eco-tourism in selected mountain areas, to address issues of poverty and rural-urban migration and, at the same time, to preserve the cultural and natural heritage in those areas. From amongst eight countries of the region, Chitral was selected as the target project location from Pakistan. This community-based initiative was implemented by the Chitral Association for Mountain Area Tourism (CAMAT). Project activities focused on training courses for eco-tourism service-providers in guiding, trekking, hospitality, cooking, and tourist-friendly transportation. Service-providers from the Kalash community were employed here. Other activities were geared towards income-generation through the revival and promotion of traditional handicrafts such as wood carving, exploring marketing and sales options, as well as the manufacturing and sale of traditional Kalash effigies in the Rumbhor Valley. It was heartening

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to observe an increased participation of the Kalash people in these project activities.

The second project came as a major breakthrough, whereby UNESCO Islamabad undertook the gigantic task of mapping the tangible and intangible cultural assets of seven districts of Khyber-Pakhtoonkhwa (KP), including Chitral, with special focus on the Kalash Valleys. Cultural mapping is more productive and beneficial when the local community is involved in identifying and mapping out resources that are meaningful to them. This participatory approach often engenders a communal sense of belonging and taking pride in cultural roots, empowers the community, and instills great pride in their cultural identity. Therefore, UNESCO ensured representation from each of the Kalash Valleys, and consequently, there were at least six bright young Kalashas engaged in the project. Apart from young girls from Upper Chitral, two young ladies from Bumburate, Zaina and Sayed Gul, were part of the core team that was given hands-on training on data collection and the use of GIS software for development and maintenance and updating of databases. The elderly, with invaluable knowledge of age-old traditions, customs and folklore of the Kalashas, were eager to share as much information as possible, and this has been documented and saved for future generations.

Besides transmission of local knowledge systems, cultural mapping is instrumental in the promotion of intercultural dialogue, whereby distinct heritage and histories are recorded, kept and shared across time and borders. This is a meaningful medium for giving

expression to diverse cultures, making possible a space for intercultural dialogue.

As a gesture of hospitality and cooperation shown by the people of Kalash, the UNESCO team was invited to the Joshi Festival in May this year, which allowed the team to map the festival and all the customs, beliefs and practices associated with it. This was a fascinating experience for all, since it is not customary to have outsiders attending exclusive rituals such as the decoration of temples and distribution of milk for purification of believers.

Following the cultural mapping project, UNESCO is working towards sustaining its efforts in the form of national and provincial databases of cultural assets as well as follow-up projects and activities to demonstrate the value of the mapping exercise. A database of both tangible and intangible cultural assets of KP has been established, which is being updated and maintained by Hazara University. One of the significant activities about to be launched this year is the documentation of the languages, cultural and oral traditions and practices of the Kalash people. This is being done within the framework of the 2003 Convention on Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, ratified by Pakistan in 2006. The proposed activity will provide an opportunity to UNESCO and its implementing partners to promote the objectives of the Convention through capacity-building initiatives, guidance on best practices, and recommendations on measures for the safeguarding of this intangible heritage.

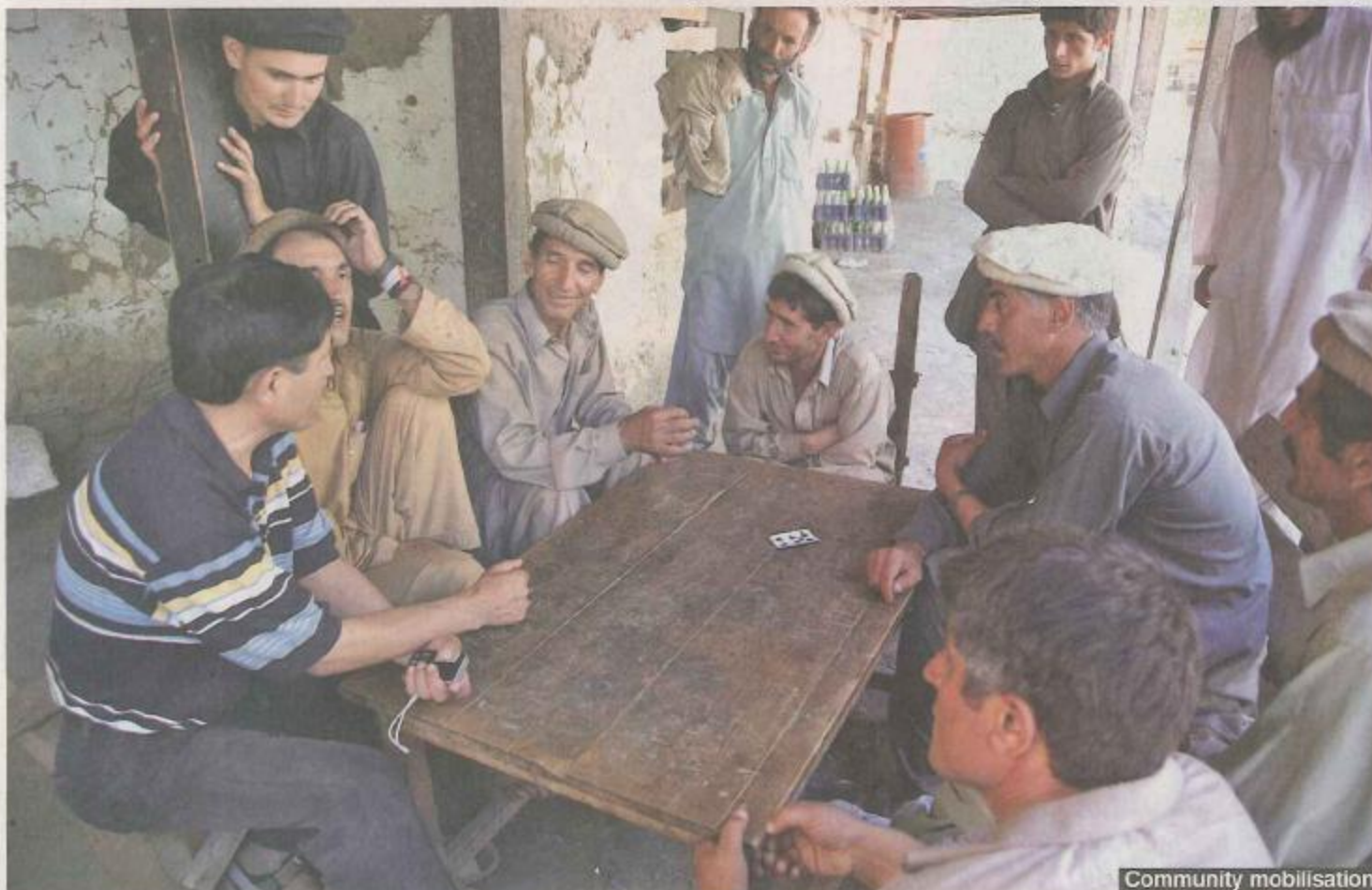
Since the emphasis of the Convention is on living expressions of intangible heritage,



Morning chores

which lie close to the hearts of communities, thereby giving them a unique identity and continuity, the proposed activity will be carried out in consultation with, and with the participation of, the local communities of the Kalash Valleys – Birir, Bumburate and Rumbhor. Training and capacity-building to support the documentation, recording and taking inventories of the Kalasha traditions, religious and social customs/practices, their languages, performing arts and craftsmanship will provide a model at the country level. These will include replication and safeguard activities which best reflect the principles and objectives of the Convention. With the involvement of local stakeholders, particularly the communities, an Urgent Safeguarding List for the Intangible Cultural Heritage will be prepared and submitted to UNESCO, seeking financial assistance for the revitalization and preservation of selected cultural expressions.

UNESCO's experience in the Kalash Valleys has shown that, when given access to information and appropriate support, communities can effectively participate in providing goods and services that meet their immediate priorities. Not only do poor communities have greater capacity than is generally recognized, but they also have the most to gain from making good use of resources targeted at poverty reduction. It is imperative therefore, for agencies, whether governmental, non-governmental or donor, working for the well-being and development of this ethnic group, to recognize that local communities like the Kalash, need to be viewed as assets and partners in the development process. At the same time, it is important to ensure that the development process fosters full respect for the dignity, human rights and cultures of these indigenous peoples. ■



Community mobilisation

Farhat Gul lives in Islamabad