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 shrouded in mystery, and many theories abound around them. Some Kalashas have even claimed to be descendants of Drusyans, the Greek and of Zoroastrians, the son of Zeus. It is commonly believed, however, that they are not of Aryan descent, perhaps originating from three 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 Akbar Khan, the ruler of Afghanistan, conquered the Kalash and compelled them to convert to Islam. Those who escaped into what are now the Kalash Valleys, to 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 Chitral, Pakistan, and its engagement with the Kalash valleys, in people and livestock, is longstanding. Ten years ago, it was a delight to see the untouched and pure beauty of the Kalash’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 of poverty, illiteracy and the lack of basic health facilities. Communities, particularly young people, if 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 Chitral, in collaboration with the Pakistan Institute of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. This preliminary interaction with the simple, hospitable Kalashas was necessary to motivate them in a sense of ownership for their culture, and pride in their identity.

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Rumshoo, which is a beautiful combination of the modern and the traditional. She took the female members of the team to the homesteads, 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, Lakhani explained that women are isolated not because they are considered inferior, but rather because they need their own space and privacy, which is not possible given the traditional Kalash family structure and way of life. Lakhani is constructing a few guest houses close to her house, with all basic amenities, which women would rent 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, Lakhani lamented that: “Economic activity has started in order to facilitate tourism, without keeping in view the cultural dimension 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 the multi and disposable items being used in households. Along with the activities of business, one can observe the invasion of rich investors who can buy land easily in these areas, and have absolute authority to do whatever they want on that land. Rumshoo, one of the Kalash Valleys, is becoming a tourist 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 Kalash's livelihood, but the investors from NWFP and Punjab are flooding in, and it is feared that the mountains will be purchased for resorts, and waterways will be polluted by litter and waste. Even now mushroom farms from Chitral have brought 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 seems to be emphasized that UNESCO has been present in the region since 2003 and has had successful 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 Ecotourism 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 in 2007 and continued until 2010.
in May 2007 and is ongoing. The first project focused on community-based cultural activities and eco-tourism in selected rural areas, in an effort to preserve the cultural and natural heritage in those areas. From amongst eight counties of the region, Chiralt was selected as the targeted project location from Pakistan. This community-based initiative was implemented by the Chiralt 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 handcrafts such as wood carving, exploring marketing and sales options, as well as the marketing and sale of traditional Kalash ethnical goods in the Ramboor Valley. It was heartening 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 the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), including Chiralt, 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 offers members 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 Chiralt, two young ladies from Bumburet, Zizi and Sayyid Gid, 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 of databases. The elderly, with invaluable knowledge of age-old traditions, customs and folklore of the Kalashas, were eager to share 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 Jash 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, 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. Bumburet and Ramboor. Training and capacity-building to support the documentation, recording and taking inventories of the Kalasha traditions, religious and social customs/practices, these languages, performing arts and craftsmanship will provide a model at the country level. These will include organization 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.