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## THE KALASH PEOPLE: LASTKAFIRS OF THE HINDU KUSH

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### Introduction

The Kalash are the last polytheistic pagan group of people in the predominately Islamic Hindu Kush area. They are also known as Kafir (non-believer) and Siyah Posh (Black Robed) approximating to be around 3,000 claims to be the descendants of Alexander's army (Ishaq et.al. 2020: 2396). At one time their ancestors ruled all the way from the Panjshir Valley, north of Kabul, to Swat and Chitral. They are the last polytheists and non-Islamic group of the Hindu Kush range living among a predominantly Muslim population in their social and geographical vicinity (Ishaq et.al. 2020: 2396).

However, their origin story is shrouded in mystery and research is still going on at various levels to identify their historical and biological ancestry. Many Kalash people believe their ancestors came to the area from a distant place known as Tsiyam, which Kalash priests and bards invoke in songs about their ancestors during festivals. Nevertheless, no one knows precisely where it was or is (Khattak, 2019).

The Kalash people are animist, nature worshipper and refusal to convert to Islam is causing the marginalisation of their people. Before we go into the elaborate analysis of the current situation of the Kalash people, it is important to understand the ethnic and sectarian backdrop of Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Pakistan has been well-known for its abhorrence towards recognition of various ethnic identities. The direct results of such attitude are: the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 and the ongoing Baloch insurgency. The country is causing violence within its own fabric because of the unwritten policy of 'othering', be it the Muhajirs, Balochis, Shias, Ahmadis/Qadianis, Ismailis, Christians, so on and so forth. As described above, with a scanty population of 3,000 Kalash people are not even 1% of the population, but they are worth mentioning due to significance of a landmass which, once upon a time, had composite history and heritage of not only Islam, but also Buddhism, Hinduism and other animistic and nature worshipping religions. The Kalash people are not only ethnically marginal, but are also a religious micro-minority.

### **Ethno-Religious Context of Pakistan**

Pakistan is a multi-ethnic, religious and linguistic country, in which each province is linked with a certain 'dominant' ethnic group, and the language is also reflective of that group. Sindh with Sindhis, Punjab with Punjabis, Balochistan with Balochis and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) with Pashtuns. The minor groups in each of the provinces are Muhajirs/Mohajir, Baloch, Pashtun in Sindh; Saraikis, Sindhis, Brahvi and Pashtun in Balochistan; Siraikis in Punjab and Hindko and Saraikis in the Tribal areas. According to the CIA World Fact book (as updated 16 April 2013), the percentage of Punjabis in Pakistan is 44.68,

Pashtuns 15.42, Sindhis 14.1, Saraikis 8.38, Muhajirs 7.57, Balochis 3.57 and others 6.28 (Austrian Red Cross 2013: 11). In terms of religious diversity, according to estimates compiled from the CIA World Factbook and Pakistan Bureau of Statistics Pakistan has 96.28% Muslim; 85–90% Sunni; 10–15% Shi'a; 0.22% Ahmadi; 1.59% Christian; 1.60% Hindu population. Interestingly, while the Constitution establishes Islam as the state religion, Articles 20-22 protect the rights of freedom of religion and religious education and Articles 26 and 27 prohibit discrimination based on religion in relation to access to public places and provision of public services (UCSIRF 2018: 65). Nevertheless, the ardent support to all forms of exclusiveness be it linguistic, ethnic or religious still cause much blood-shed in Pakistan. Interestingly, in April 2017, a provincial court in Peshawar officially recognised the Kalash community as a separate ethnic and religious group. This acknowledgement was the culmination of a lengthy fight in the predominantly Islamic country, where religious and other minorities often come under scrutiny by authorities and even attack by militants (Bezhan, 2017).

However, the common perception within Pakistan, is that the state is not ethnically impartial and the foremost linguistic group is the Punjabis. The key institutions where this preponderance is most clearly visible is army and bureaucracy, particularly at the highest level (Samad 2013: 5). The reason for Punjabis' relative contentment is that they have been over-represented in the state apparatus and non-representative institutions like military and civil bureaucracy as well as in sectors like the finance, commerce, business and industry. Furthermore, after the secession of East Pakistan in 1971, Punjabis became over whelming majority in provinces which enabled them in consolidating their hold in the state apparatus (Zahoor, 2013).

Pakistan's central problem has been splintered national unity, polarised as it has been with ethnic and sectarian differences. The central point here is poor governance, economic disparities and fragmented society, eliciting alliances for personal not collective gains (Haleem 2003: 473-474). The ethnic tension of Pakistan is also entwined with the confused Federal identity of the country. In the Lahore Resolution of March 23, 1940, Muslim League maintained that 'the federating units of Pakistan would be autonomous and sovereign'. That is why, throughout the history of independent Pakistan this aspect of the Resolution has nearly always been quoted by advocates of autonomy of federating units (Mushtaq 2009: 287). The Resolution also mentioned that the central government would be limited to defence, foreign affairs, foreign trade, communications and currency (Saikal 2010: 8). History explains why ethnic tensions are built into the political fabric of Pakistan. The Pakistani state that emerged from the 1947 put together warring ethnic groups that had never before been united in the same polity prior to the arrival of the British (Harrison 2009: 13).

### **Understanding the Kalash people**

The Kalash are an isolated South Asian population of Indo-European speakers residing in the Hindu Kush mountain valleys in northwest Pakistan, near the Afghanistan frontier. They represent a religious minority with unique and rich cultural traditions (Ayub et. al. 2015: 775). In scientific terms, human populations show subtle allele-frequency differences that lead to geographical structure, and available methods therefore allow individuals to be

clustered with accordance to genetic information into groups that correspond to geographical regions. In an early worldwide survey of this kind, division into five clusters unsurprisingly identified (1) Africans, (2) a widespread group including Europeans, Middle Easterners, and South Asians, (3) East Asians, (4) Oceanians, and (5) Native Americans. However, division into six groups led to a more surprising finding: the sixth group consisted of a single population, the Kalash (Rosenberg et. al. 2002).

### **Geography**

The Hindu Kush mountain range contains some of the world's highest peaks. This particular landscape has a significant impact on the daily lives of Kalash people. Their villages are traditionally built along the steep mountainsides with houses on top of each other in order not to take up valuable levelled ground for agriculture (Heegård and Liljegren 2018: 135). As their number is shrinking, the Kalash people are found in three valleys of the Hindu Kush: Rumbur, Bumburet and Birir in the Chitral<sup>1</sup> district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. However, these three names are considered to be known to non-Kalash people, with the original nomenclature being: Biri, Rukmu and Mumuret (Ali, et. al. 2020: 988). The Rumbur and Bumburet form a single culture due to their similar cultural practices, while Birir being the most traditional one forms a separate culture. The Kalash people reside in 15 villages of these three valleys as part of the Ayun Union Council (Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa 2019: vii). The modern state of Chitral was once an old country with its borders extending up to Badakshan and Bashagalin the North West and the Kunar valley in the south all the way to Bilam and Chaghasswari. Most of these areas now lie in Afghanistan. Border of the state was not permanent due to the ongoing expansion of the neighbouring state of Gilgit and Kashmir (Sheikh et. al. 2014: 427).

These valleys, each with a river running through their core, form part of the eastern Hindu Kush which continues into Afghanistan. The region, comprising the three valleys is at the crossroad of Nuristan province of Afghanistan in the west, Swat and Gilgit in the east, Pamir Knot in the north and Lowari Pass in the south. Bumburet is approximately 12 miles long; the other valleys are somewhat shorter and narrower. The soil in the valleys is mixed with stones and boulders; low in clay content and, due to severe dryness, very low in nitrogen and organic matter and also low in potassium and phosphorus (Naqvi 1996: 687).

### **History**

Due to non-existence of written history, the origin of Kalash is not known and controversies exist among researchers and historians on this particular subject (Taj and Ali 2018: 35). Pressure on the Kalash people to convert to Islam has existed for centuries. The local people of neighbouring Nuristan province of Afghanistan once followed somewhat similar tradition and religious practice of the Kalash. Interestingly, in those days Nuristan was known as Kafiristan- land of the Kafir (Rose, 1992). The Kafiristan was abode of animist tribe. The Red Kafirs (of Kafiristan) and Black Kafirs (of Chitral) had some ethnic and lingual similarities. Historian suggested that, once, all Kafirs (of the Hindu Kush) were one group, which later subdivided into two major groups; Kalash Kafirs or Black Kafir and Kati

or Red Kafirs (Ali, et.al., 2020: 990). Tragically, in the 19th century, the Kalash were brutally conquered by the Muslim Afghans. Their ancient temples and wooden idols were destroyed, their women were forced to burn their folk costumes and wear the burqa or veil, and the entire people were converted at sword point to Islam (Stasinopoulou, 2019).

The Kalash are the last survivors of the people of Kafiristan, an area that encompassed northwest Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan before the region was divided by the Durand Line, the border established between Afghanistan and British India in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Bezhan, 2017). It is believed that in 1895 Amir (King) Abdur Rahman Khan, the king of Afghanistan, conquered the area and forced the inhabitants of the area to convert to Islam. The inhabitants were forcibly converted to Islam in 1895-96 (Rose, 1992). Known as the “Iron Amir,” he proceeded to name the area Nuristan, or the “Land of Celestial Light” (Khattak, 2019). Fifty years later, two Kalash valleys of Jinjeretkuh and Urtsun were forced to adopt Islam. The three remaining valleys, as mentioned earlier were saved only because the Prince of Chitral wanted to use the Kalash as slaves (Rose, 1992). During the past decades, around 50 per cent of the total population in Kalash have converted to Islam (Stasinopoulou, 2019).

Earlier, Kalash remained as slaves of the Mehtar of Chitral because at that time Chitral was a princely state, and the British had no part to play in its administration. Nothing changed after the British left the subcontinent in 1947. Chitral became part of independent Pakistan, but the only difference the people experienced after independence was that a Pakistani civil servant took charge (Kazmi 2016: 75). Their socio-economic situation and religious independence remained under the constant vigil of the non-Kalash Muslim population.

### **Religion and Rituals**

The concept of Onjesta (purity) and Pragata (impurity or pollution) are the fundamental concepts and religious cosmology of Kalash community and dictate most of their worldly affairs. Men and women; mountain and stream; highland and low land; home and Bishalini (women exclusive place for staying at times of menstruation cycles and pregnancy), goats and cows are considered to be embodiments of this dichotomy (Sheikh, 2013). The major deities of the Kalash people are: Irma (the Supreme Creator), Sajigor (the Warrior God), Maha-deo (God of Promise), Balumain (Divider of Riches), Dezalik or Disini (Goddess of Fertility), Ingaw (God of Prosperity), Shigan (God of Health), Jatch or Zaz (God for breeding goats), Kotsomaiush (Goddess of Nature and Feminism) and Istogosh (Custodian of Tradition). Apart from the deities there are Suchi- fairies, Bhut- demons and Wawa-ancestors (Sheikh et. al. 2014: 429-430).

As Kalash people have great reverence for their ancestors, the conventional wooden statues naming Gandao are erected by their predecessor with a special goal to refresh the father's memoir as symbolic representation of deceased. These are erected on the grave of the ancestors. Regrettably, now rarely families practice this age-old tradition (Islam 2020:39). The significance of lakes in the Kalash area is also utmost from the perspectives of religion and ritual. Bahuk, Awazak and Shawal lakes are considered holy in nature by the Kalash people.

There are two types of religious events in Kalash society. The first kind may be considered as having a religious ceremony as well as festivities while other events are only religious in nature, without dancing and singing. Their major festivals are: Joshi, Chaumos, Uchaw and Pul/Poh (Ali, 2011). Moreover, the detailed analysis of the Kalash festivities throw light on the importance of changing seasons, and also the seasonal deities. A common division seems to be that into two halves, Spring/Summer and Autumn/Winter. For example, Mara is welcomed in Spring, and Munjem in the Fall. Among the Kalash, the pastoral God Sorizan protects the herds in Fall and Winter and is thanked at the winter festival, while Goshidai does so until the Pul festival and is thanked at the Joshi festival in Spring (Witzel 2004: 587). A period known as Dicis also observed in the Bumburet and Rumbur valleys (for three and seven days respectively) where the Kalash people cannot be in touch with the non-Kalash people and eating chicken and eggs, braiding women's hair are forbidden. It is considered to be the most Onjesta of the periods (UNESCO 2019: 30).

The rituals of Kalash people are performed by the shamans known as Dehar. They are considered to be the healers and communicators with the divine deities. They are often approached for the cure of natural illnesses and misfortune. Also, Qazi in Kalash society has same status as an Alim in Islam. He is considered as an honest and wise man, who guides the norm of traditional culture. They are part of the village jirga and are responsible for announcing days of Kalash festivals and teaching the youth their indigenous tradition (dastur/dastoor), rituals and customs (Sheikh et. al. 2014: 428).

In Kalash ritual, the deities are seen, as in Vedic ritual (and in Hindu religious system), as temporary visitors. The Kalash shrines are located, under the open sky at trees (juniper, oak, cedar etc) and they are identified and symbolised by a wooden board or a stone altar. There always is an opening, apparently to the other world of the Gods (Witzel 2004: 586).

The Kalash people also rejoice the death with elaborate ceremony and celebrations. In the center of Jushtkan (holy hall) dead bodies are kept in resting for three days. They sing and dance around the bodies of their loved ones for two to three days before burying them in a coffin and offer a feast with a sacrifice of 30 to 40 goats to guests who come to celebrate (not mourn) the death (Ahmed, 2010).

### **Language**

The Kalash language is said to be part of the Dardic group of Indo-Aryan languages. The language is considered to be critically endangered by UNESCO. The language is also called Kalashamon. There are two main dialect clusters of Kalash: Northern (spoken in Birir, Bumburet and Rumbur valleys) and Southern (Jinjiret and Urtsun valleys) (Hussain and Mielke 2020: 66). Like many other tribal based languages all over the world, Kalash has no proper script; though, there have been recent developments in introducing a formal script for the language. Generally, these days both Latin and Arabic (Nastalik style) script are used for writing Kalash language. Yet, no effort has been made from the government to give their language a written documentation, and there does not exist even a single standard text devoted to the culture. The grade of endangerment of Kalash is firmly linked with rates of conversion to Islam as well as migration to other major cities where children are exposed to the dominant languages: Punjabi, Siraiki, Urdu, Sindhi, Pashto etc.

In terms of dialectal variation, Bumburet and Rumbur valleys have very similar dialects and there are no noticeable differences (Heegård and Mørch 2017: 240). The Birir dialect, though it belongs to the Northern chain, is slightly different from the Bumburet and Rumbur dialects (Hussain and Mielke 2020: 69). Also, unfortunately, due to societal pressure, in Jinjiret and Urtsun, Kalash is being replaced by Khowar and not transmitted to children any longer (Heegård and Liljegren 2018: 134). The Kalash language is in grave danger due to fast paced intrusion of non-Kalash norms and culture within the three valleys. As the younger generation is getting exposed to the outer world and state sponsored education, a feeling of shame is also developing among them vis-à-vis their own language, among many other Kalash characteristics.

### **State Policy Towards the Kalash People**

The early decades of Pakistan can be considered somewhat less troublesome for the Kalash community. Their ethnic and religious identity was not much threatened by the state or individual. The Constitution of Pakistan guarantees the preservation of such distinct languages and cultures. Article 28 of the Constitution affirms these rights and states that:

“...any section of citizens having a distinct language, script or culture shall have the right to preserve and promote the same and subject to law, establish institutions for that purpose.”

Ayub Khan's government provided some relief and identity to the Kalash community. Nevertheless, it was Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who realised the importance of this indigenous tribe. He was the first Pakistani Prime Minister who visited Bumburet valley and addressed the Kalash people, the tribe was encouraged to follow their ancient religion and traditions (Jan, 1996). In 1974, the Government of Pakistan took a strong initiative and gave security to the Kalash culture through an executive order by declaring that the Kalash culture will be freed from the pressure of alien forces and preserved for future. Nevertheless, this executive order could not be translated into a policy and practices at the local level (Malik and Waheed 2005:16).

Unfortunately, the situation changed for worse during military rule of Zia-ul-Haq. During this period Kalash tribe experienced the unfriendliness, vulnerability and drastic change in their society. Throughout the said period the conversion cases of the tribe were speeded up (Ali et., al. 2020:991). There was uncertainty on political grounds in Pakistan from 1988 to 1999, after Haq. In the said timeframe four civil governments were dissolved. Therefore, none of the governments could concentrate on the minorities' rights, including the Kalash. During the first term of Nawaz Sharif, one school for the Kalash children was established (Ali, et. al., 2020:992).

There is not sufficient literature, which is available in public domain to understand and analyse the role of government with respect to preservation of Kalash people. Interestingly, in 2018, Kalash secured parliamentary representation, marking a major milestone in the country's election history. Hailing from Chitral Valley, Wazir Zada is the first ever member

of the Kalash community, who has been elected as member of KP's provincial assembly on a reserved seat for religious minorities (Latif, 2018).

Their survival will probably depend on whether the Government of Pakistan decides it can waive the revenues generated by their status as tourist displays. Whatever the motive, preservation of the Kalash as a distinct people will require a series of positive measures. Furthermore, given the dire economic situation within which Pakistani governments function, their protection will require treating them favourably (Naqvi 1996:674).

### **Important Threats for Existence**

Minorities in Pakistan are related to one or another kind of religion whose followers and traditions are available in sub-continent and world at large. But, Kalash is a diverse kind of minority. Their culture, way of living and world view is non-existent anywhere in the world and over time there is a strong indication that they are reducing in number even from the three Kalash valleys. The gradual reduction in their number over time and their presence in one land locked area of Pakistan coupled with the fact of their social, political, religious, ethnic and cultural loneliness should have made a strong case for a supportive treatment for them. Still, their minority status is not properly recognised like many other minorities in Pakistan. Their stark difference from the dominant Muslim culture and the fact that they are alone to defend it in the whole world make them extremely vulnerable to defend themselves (Malik and Waheed 2005: 18 and 19).

**Forest as part of their abode-** With the height of the valleys ranging between 1,800 meters to 3,800 meters, the natural forest in the three valleys mainly consists of pine (*pinus wallchiana*), chilgoza (*pinus gerardiana*), juniper, deodar (*cedrus deodara*) and holly/holm oak (*quercus baloot*). Grape vines may be seen wrapped around holly oak trees, which provide grapes for eating, drying and making wine (tara). The wood is used as timber and firewood, and also serves a spiritual purpose, being an integral part of important rituals. The area is also famous for its fruits (mulberries, pears, apples and apricots), nuts (pine nuts and walnuts), honey and a wide variety of wild mushrooms (UNESCO 2019: 17). The forests are an essential part of spiritual and daily requirements of the Kalash people. They have a sustainable relationship with the forest in and around their villages.

Rampant cutting of wooden logs is causing hazard to the lifestyle of the Kalash. The Kalash people depend heavily on forests for their livelihood as well as their ritual cultural practices. Interestingly, all Kalash people are legal collective owners of forest lands in three Kalash valleys under customary laws. Non-Kalash residents claim ownership rights but the Kalash people consider them non-local and non-owners (Zeb, et. al. 2019). The Kalash see the forest as vital to their cultural existence and have fought to protect their rights to the land. For instance, from the 1980's into the early 1990's the Kalash of the Rumbur Valley were involved in a 10-year court case to protect the forest for future generations (HPNET, 2020).

According to NCHR Report, dated 2017, the most urgent complaint of the Kalash elders is that they are being deprived of their centuries-old claims of ownership over the Silver Oak forests in the Kalash Valleys. The forest, the report points out, is important economically to the Kalash (Baloch, 2018). But, shamelessly, the land revenue officials have told the Kalash people that the Silver Oak forests are a part of *Shamilat*<sup>2</sup>, which means that the local Kalash residents cannot exercise their privileged right over the forest rather they would have to share the forest with all the concerned land owners (Muslim and non-Kalash residents) of the area (NCHR, 2017). The malpractice is continuing denying basic rights to the people of Kalash valleys who have been the residents since time immemorial.

**Protecting indigenous Kalash Identity-** Pakistan is very diverse, both religiously and ethnically, but religious-leaning groups call it one Islamic nation while ignoring the thousands of years of history of many communities and nations. To some level, Kalash have been successful in conserving their primitive culture and ancestral religion for thousands of years though, their identity based on the distinct religion and culture are under gravedanger lately. The Kalash are one of the oldest aboriginal communities in Pakistan, and one of the very few living indigenous cultures in the world. But the Kalash are struggling to save their rich and very ancient culture while caught between the Taliban to the west, bordering Afghanistan, and other socio-economic and religious forces from the east and south in Pakistan (Baloch, 2018).

The Kalash, today, face a lot of pressure on their culture and with the non-Kalash population overwhelming them, they face threats of extinction. Some of the immediate threats are unwilling conversions and cajoled marriages of Kalash women with non-Kalash men (NCHR 2017: 2). The biggest threat is the conversion of Kalash which is resulting into extinction of this community. Other threats are violence and robberies especially of their goats and cows which is lifeline of this community (Ishaq et.al. 2020: 2402). In 2017, an organised effort was made to stop the festival of Joshi. Posters were also distributed to disrupt the festival. An environment of fear is being created in the valleys. The Kalash expected and demanded that the state must create a conducive environment to ensure peace and order (HRCP 2017: 11). For the state, these people are a means to showcase the vibrant and colourful side of Pakistan to western tourists. Therefore, at times few token gestures are shown by the governments, for instance setting up of Kalash Museum KAL'AS'A DUR (the House of Kalasha) in Bumburet Valley. Also, a school-Kalash Culture and Traditional School, was built in 2007 by the government within the premise of this museum to 'preserve' Kalash culture and tradition.

**Threat from State sponsored education-** With the overt pretext of imparting education to children and mainstreaming them with rest of the country, the schools try to alienate the young pupils from the Kalash way of life. Islamic instruction is mandatory in all public schools in Pakistan. The teachings of Allah in Arabic imbibe a sense of inferiority among the

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<sup>2</sup>*Shamilat* or *ShamilatDeh* are universally used in Pakistan to denote village common land. The best translation of *Shamilat* in English would be "Common Land" or "Community Land".

students, as they are constantly told by the teachers how inferior and immoral their un-Islamic practices are. Resultantly, the young students with an impressionable mind feel inferior about their own religion and consider it to be lower (Gangopadhyay, 2020). The Islamic teachings and traditions, taught through the text books, directly conflict with some of the most fundamental concepts of the Kalash religion and culture. This has caused discomfort in Kalash communities as some of them characterise this issue as foremost cause for conversion of Kalash boys and girls to Islam (Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa 2019:8). Moreover, sadly, Kalash children are mocked for their customs and are given sermons about life after death, heaven, and hell in schools by their Muslim teachers. Religious preaching leaves a strong influence and impression on young minds and consequently the Islamic doctrine is profoundly inculcated. School going kids eventually end up as converts in later stages of their life (Khan, 2009).

The marginal improvement caused due to education in the three valleys in a way is at the cost of danger to the indigenous non-Islamic culture. The elderly people in the community are worried that the advent of modern lifestyle and the younger generation's proximity to Islamic lifestyle and teachings (when they go to school) are likely to usher in many irreversible changes (Gangopadhyay, 2020). Activists also complain the rate of conversions is growing by the year because in the absence of a curriculum for the minority community in government schools, Kalash students are forced to opt for Islamic studies (Gul, 2016). The psychological pressure of a dominant and different religion is tremendous on the young Kalash minds. On a daily basis they are not only surrounded by Islamic culture and ethos, but at the same time they have to follow the strict rules and regulations. For example, it is mandatory for Kalash girls to wear Chador<sup>3</sup> in the school. And the Kalash students have to recite Quranic verses in praise of Allah and Muhammad. It does not matter whether they like such imposed practices or not. They are forced to follow the non-Kalash religious dictums.

**Surviving natural disaster-** People of Kalash community don't over-use natural resources beyond a limit. They need to maintain equilibrium between what they need for living and what nature offers. It is a basic lesson that Kalash community has understood and practiced for their survival as being almost isolated within narrow valleys and thick mountains. The very equilibrium between the needs of the Kalash people and resources in the form of forest, pastures and arable land is keeping their survival possible. Sadly, still the community is facing both environmental as well as human pressures in the form of natural hazards. This region is considered vulnerable for high probability of earthquakes and flash floods (Ishaq et.al. 2020: 2400 and 2404). The Balanguru village in Bumburetvalley faced flash flood in September, 2020. Guesthouse, community and primary school of the village were destroyed. This village however, is no stranger to flooding. After high river levels caused devastating damage to the village that sits on its banks in 2013 and again in 2015 (Wild Frontiers, 2021).

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<sup>3</sup> The chador is a full-body-length shawl held closed at the neck by hand or pin. It covers the head and the body but leaves the face completely visible.

Deforestation for timber and fuelwood not only disrupts the health of the watershed but triggers climate induced disasters such as glacial lake outburst of floods (GLOF). Floods and erratic monsoon patterns lead to major destruction of crops and infrastructure, disruption in energy supply and loss of livelihoods. Furthermore, glacial floods have changed the entire landscapes, posing serious risks around soil erosion, species migration and food insecurity (HPNET, 2020).

**Problem of connectivity-** The absence of a proper road to link the valleys to the rest of the country has over the years discouraged local and foreign tourists to show up in large numbers at their annual festivals. It also makes it enormously difficult for the community to transport patients to hospitals in Chitral for treatment during medical emergency (Gul, 2016). Though in 2017, the Lowari Tunnel, connecting Chitral, where the Kalash live, to the district of Upper Dir was formally inaugurated, the Kalash themselves, however, hardly get benefit from related business as respective enterprises are controlled by non-Kalash people (Gul, 2019). The dilapidated condition of roads leading to Kalash valleys are in a stark contrast to the scale and quality of the project of Lowari Tunnel. The difficult and hazardous road conditions are a major impediment in the socio-economic welfare of Kalash people (NCHR 2017: 16).

At the same time taking advantage of the existing situation, A budget of PKR 4 billion has been approved for road construction in Kalash valleys, which is commendable but insensitive planning and designing of roads can pose a huge threat to the Kalasha religious practices and culture (HRCP 2017: 12). In August, 2020 Provincial Minister for Culture and Labour, Shoukat Ali Yousafzai said that roads of Kalash valley would be paved on priority basis so that more and more tourists to be attracted to this beautiful valley (Shabbir, 2020). It is very well understood that the government is more interested in tourist influx into the Kalash valleys rather than the infrastructure development. The basic needs of the people in these areas are dependent on tourism industry.

### **Challenges and process of inevitable Islamic Conversion**

The Kalash religion was once widespread in Central Asia, but the Kalash villagers who live here in the Chitral Valley make up the last known Kalash settlement in the world. These days their exclusive religion, language and culture are on the verge of extinction due to a combination of official apathy and threats from violent and other non-state actors. Although the process of gradual annihilation started many years back.

The documentation of Kalash conversion to Islam was done in 1890 by S. G. Robertson, who in *The Kafirs of the Hindukush* (1897) presented the earliest description of Kalash conversions in his extensive study of Kalash history, geography, religion, practices, rituals, and conversions (Kazmi 2016: 74). Over the past century, Muslims from modern-day Pakistan and Afghanistan began moving in the valley. Now the local Kalash villagers say their culture and religion are threatened by forced conversions, assaults and robberies. "We are scared,"

said Yasir Kalash, the manager of a hotel. "They capture our lands, our pastures and our forests, and sometimes take our goats and women. . . . We are afraid in the next few years we will be finished" (Craig, 2016). In 2012, they launched a campaign for recognition of their religion and culture. In 2015, National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) accepted their stance but still they do not have their own identity for other legal certifications. In order to get documents like passport, etc., they are enforced to write 'other religions' in the religion column. The Kalash people think that unless they are legally recognised as a separate religion in Pakistan, attempt to have Kalash culture, religion and community conserved and included in the world heritage list might not be successful (HRCP 2017:6-7).

Traveling **Islamic scholars** are increasingly showing up in the valley, and after each visit, villagers say, their Muslim neighbours appear less tolerant. The scholars are against the production and use of wine by the local Kalash people. During General Zia's rule, Islamization started in the Kalash valleys like other parts of Pakistan. The first madrasa was built in late 1980s (Sahi, 2014). Around 1981 a mosque was built forcefully on cultivable land in the Bumburet valley and it triggered conflict and Islamization in the area (Zaidi, 2001). Now, there are mosques and madrasas everywhere in the Kalash areas. The families are divided because of conversions, as under duress or financial lure many members of the same family opted for Islam, causing chaos in their already dwindling social structure. The Kalash people are often pressured to not practice their rituals during Muslim prayer timings (Sahi, 2014).

The followers of **Tablighi Jama'at**<sup>4</sup> also threaten the Kalash people. The Kalash people lived in relative peace and harmony with each other and their environs until 1977, when the Tablighi Jama'at entered the valley. The Jama'at took over the hotels and land from the local people and in just a short span of time, 50 to 70 per cent of the ancestral Kalash land was gone (Sohail, 2016). The people of Tablighi Jama'at were looked at as the men of God, and so the Kalash converts took the word of the preacher for the word of God. Whatever the people of the Tablighi Jama'at told them, the converts believed, because they were assumed to be the ones who could understand and convey the message of God (Kazmi 2016: 84). Such influence definitely hampered the Kalash way of life. As reported in March, 2014, local Police Chief admitted that there are serious threats to the survival of Kalash. "We have banned Tablighi Jama'at in these valleys. State has been trying its best to protect them but we cannot stop conversions. We have asked FM radio operators to refrain from objectionable language in their programmes," he says (Sahi, 2014). Earlier, many Tablighis who routinely carry Kalashnikovs had killed a horde of Kalash people who refused to convert to Islam. Such brutal crimes are committed in order to send a clear message to the community so that they are left with no other option but to convert to Islam (Zaidi, 2001).

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<sup>4</sup> The global Islamic missionary movement that is proselytizing and revivalist in its teachings. The aim of this organisation is to urge Muslims to return to the orthodox Islam, and help others convert to Islam by *Dawah* (invitation) (Kazmi 2016:76).

The religious identity of the Kalash people is threatened by the prevalent process of systematic **land-grabbing**. Kalash did not have proprietorship over their temples and alters. Their places for religious festivals and rituals and the centuries-old routes for religious ceremonies were being encroached upon and grabbed. Lack of legal title for their places of worship made them more and more vulnerable to encroachment. Land grabbing by the influential people who manage to use law in their favour is an enormous challenge to the Kalash religion. Land grabbers are bent upon owning the whole area (HRCP 2017:8). Not only the holy spaces, but the Kalash graveyards are frequently vandalised and desecrated by robbers, resulting in both anger and fear among the remaining Kalash people. The reason for grave-robbery is the non-Islamic faith of these people, who are considered inferior by the Muslims of the surrounding areas. In Pakistan, the religious minorities are a frequent prey of the land-grabbers, who in majority of cases force the minorities to evacuate their dwellings, places of worship and localities. Even the royal family of Chitral and local Kalash villagers of Batreeg, Aneesh, Bron, Krakaal and Dars Gurohare villages are confronting each other for forests and other lands. In 2018, Supreme Court gave its verdict to divide the lands of these five villages between the two parties. The royal family was to get two thirds of the land and about a hundred Kalasha families were to get the rest. Despite the verdict, the royal family has not accepted it. The case has taken too much time. Now, out of 100 families, 40 families have become Muslim [because conversion might help their legal cases]. Reportedly, the royal family is selling the lands and forests [to outsiders] as well (Baloch, 2019).

Besides the role of Tablighi Jama'at and other religious groups, **Muslim money lenders** in adjoining areas pressurise the locals to convert. Pashtun community of adjoining Dir district gives Kalash people loans on tough conditions. When they fail to repay the loan, many are offered a waiver on condition of their conversion (Sahi, 2014). Many financially impoverished Kalash people convert to Islam because they are incentivized by money or a promise of equality in treatment by the Muslims living around them (Nadeem, 2013). The Kalash men are in general involved in low-income generation activities of manual labour, agricultural farming, livestock, and tourism. There is in general, dearth of finances in the Kalash villages. When a Kalash man converts, he is usually given cash (presumably in celebration) by his new brethren—often a significant amount, which some of the new converts use to reacquire their mortgaged property (Naqvi 1996: 693).

Kalash villagers also are fearful of violent attacks, including raids by **Taliban** militants. They have serious threat of extinction. In 2009, Taliban militants kidnapped Professor Athanasios Larounis, a Greek aid worker who had generated around 2.5 million pound for the building and development of schools, clinics and a museum in the Kalash valleys. According to the local police at the time, the Taliban targeted him because he was supporting and preserving the Kalash culture and community (HRCP 2017:9). Later he was released after eight months of captivity. It is said that Greek Government paid up to 1 million pound to secure his safe release from the Taliban. After being recovered, he came once to meet the Kalash people. But when he went back, he never returned (Baloch, 2019). In 2013,

Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (Malakand Division) threatened this tribe and another religious minority of the region - the Ismailia. Taliban gave them two options – ‘convert to Islam or face death’. Given the gravity of situation, if such forced conversions are not stopped well in time, it is feared that Kalash’s distinct socio-religious identity will cease to exist in a few years’ time (Taj and Ali 2018: 36).

## Conclusions

Kalash people are not only colourful but have a syncretic lifestyle with the nature and their surroundings. They are the last remnants of the fabled Kafirs of the Hindu Kush. Unfortunately, throughout the Hindu Kush, the Kalash people have been persecuted as infidels, killed and forced to convert to Islam. It must never be forgotten that the Kalash are citizens of Pakistan; their identity as a distinct section of Pakistani society must be recognised. Their language and religion must be included in the lists of religions and languages for the national population census of Pakistan. Regrettably, it seems, their culture, will probably not survive beyond next few years, as it is heading towards fast extinction.

One needs to understand that the mystic belief of the Kalash is not part of an organised religion. Their faith is neither books or buildings. Without holy scriptures, mosques, temples or churches the Kalash are guided by the signs and rhythms of nature. Their most important goal is to live life in harmony with their surroundings.

Life in the valleys has changed greatly in recent years. The Kalash are no longer isolated. Now they face the question of how to preserve their culture and religion at the time of radical upheaval. As discussed in the above sections, this new connection to the outside world has not only enabled Islam to march into the valleys, modern civilization is also encroaching.

Interestingly, the converted Kalash are given the social status of Sheikh, following the peculiar caste-based Islamic order of the Indian sub-continent. A local village where the converts live is called Sheikha’nanda: the living place of Sheikhs. The ‘stigma’ of having once been a kafir never leaves them. They are still considered low in status because of their Kafir lineage, but slightly more equal than the non-converts. Converts, before conversion, are made to believe that they are filthy kafirs, pagans, impure and unclean. They are made to believe that their religion is not valid, their beliefs unwarranted, their prayers useless (Kazmi 2016: 82). Ironically, the egalitarian Kalash people enter into the regimented and segmented mores of Islam as corruptly practiced in the Indian sub-continent.

The above discussion is a good initiation point to understand the process of Islamization in a non-Islamic community. The various ways, means and reasons causing the change in the people. Conversion can happen in both ways- drastic and gradual. The Kalash people have faced both these ways and are still trying to make sense of their polytheist religion and liberal cultural within the surroundings of Monotheist Islam and prevalent social constraints.

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