



**The Indigenous Kalash People: A Unique Culture at Risk of
Extinction**

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Kalash People celebrating their Traditional Festivals



Abstract

Kalash is the indigenous groups of people residing in northern Pakistan in Chitral District, having a religion which is associated with animism(but the exact name is not known) and unique culture. The most commonly believed hypothesis is that they ruled the whole district from 2nd Century BC till the mid 17th century. Gradually, due to many factors, Kalash lost their power and authority the region it had controlled before. Now their population is limited to three regions of Chitral namely, Bumburet, Rumbur and Birir, and approximately 3000 Kalash people live in these valleys altogether. Many studies have shown that Kalash culture is under threat of extinction because of the insignificant role of the government towards the preservation of their culture. Government's indifferent attitude in terms of protecting Kalash is threatening sign of their extinction. Being a minority in Chitral, Kalash people face different issues from the dominating Muslim culture. Mostly, they have been converted to Islam through missionaries as well as intermarriages. More often than not, Kalash people are deprived of many opportunities, including education and employment by the government. Nevertheless, Kalash people are a big source of income to the whole of Pakistan due to their different culture and practices. The regions where Kalash reside serves as a tourist spot. The government should realize the importance and the benefits of Kalash culture for the country and initiate more measures in order to protect and promote their culture.

Introduction

Kalash valley (Pakistan) is home to a very unique and indigenous group of Kalash people. The Kalash people consisting of almost 3000 individuals living in the South-West of Chitral, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Ethnically they are defined as Indo-Iranians and speak Kalashamun, a Dardic language. The culture of Kalash people is unique and differs drastically from the various ethnic groups surrounding them. They are a religious minority and are known worldwide due to their rare culture and traditions. The crisis that Kalash people face today is the constant reduction in their population because many Kalash people are converted to Islam and also due to the culture and social influence of the local community. Several Mosques and Madrasa are built in Kalash Valley and many religious missionaries are sent there to manipulate Kalash people to convert to Islam. The population is also reducing due to inter-marriages of Kalash people and the local people of the Chitrali community. This project focuses on some of the reasons which caused a reduction in the population of the Kalash people.

Literature Review:

Since the accession of the princely state, Chitral, to the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Kalash people have been given the status of minorities under the laws of the Pakistani constitution. In practice, however, the Kalash situation is filled with infiltration from all over the region and they are struggling to preserve their traditions, culture, and religion. Mytee Fyntz, a research associate at the Department of Anthropology and Ethnography at the University of Aarhus writes that among the Kalash, numerous different reasons for

converting are given, such as threats, reprisals and oppression from authorities, earlier the Mehtar's (Muslim ruler) soldiers and later oppressions from the organized armies of the local Mullahs. They invaded the valleys, seizing many Kalasha and forcing them to convert to Islam (Jan 1990). It is thus clear that the main reason for the reduction in the Kalash population is the forced conversion of the non-Islamic group to Islam in the past. Taj Khan while doing his research under the supervision of Professor Renata Uitz who became the director of the Comparative Constitutional Law in 2007 writes in his research paper that Pakistan's failure to protect and recognize the protective status of Kalash people has led to violation of the Kalasha people's human rights as it undermines their means of subsistence and severely compromises their physical, spiritual, cultural and economic integrity. The issue at hand, hence, is whether the Kalasha could still claim restitution for their lands, trees, and pastures, which they are taken from through force and are indispensable for their cultural survival as indigenous people (Taj 2009). If we look at the present conditions of the Kalash people we can observe that their culture is at the point of extinction because the government of Pakistan has not been able to provide the basic indigenous rights to the Kalash people which they possess under the constitutional laws of Pakistan. As well as they are deprived of their universal indigenous people's rights. This is one reason that Kalash people are converting to Islam mostly to seek more opportunities for a better life and to enjoy more rights which the Muslim community of the country enjoys.

Objectives of the study

The project aims at discovering the reasons which led to the reduction in Kalash

culture/people on the basis of formal and candid interviews from Kalash people who participated in the project.

Significances of the Study:

This study will provide reasons which the Kalash people themselves think are the factors that led their culture to the point of extinction. It also provides recommendations that should be taken for the protection and preservation of Kalash population/culture.

Methodology:

The report is conducted through the collection of primary data from the people of Kalash valley. With that secondary sources such as books, online resources and articles are also included. We conducted interviews with 85 local people. The interviews were structured with relevant questionnaires. Moreover, we also conducted semi-structured and informal interviews. Candid discussions are also a part of the report. The target population of the project was Kalash people from Birir, Bumberet, and Rumbur. The interviewees were adults of varied age groups. We spent a week in the targeted area visiting their houses and conversing with local Kalash people. We checked into schools and health centers of the valleys and with the help of the respective authorities, we conducted a few more interviews from local teachers and health officials. We made the participants fully aware of the aims of the project and filled consent forms for every interviewee. Given the sensitivity of the project, for most of the times the participants were reluctant to give their identity, so we had to keep their identity anonymous. For the interviews, we took help of some local tour guides, who accompanied us throughout the procedure. In addition, we conducted

in-person and online surveys from local people of Chitral district other than Kalash ethnicity for more in-depth analysis of the discourse. **Sample Questions:**

The questions asked were open-ended and subjective.

- What are some of the major reasons of the diminishing number of Kalash people?
- Have you witnessed any of your friend/relative converting to other religion?
- Have you faced any problem/discrimination due your ethnicity?
- Has the government been successful to preserve Kalash people/culture?
- What are your expectations as Kalash from the NGOs working for the welfare of Kalash region?
- What kind of changes you expect from the government for the betterment of the region/people?

Findings or Results:

1: Kalasha Language is endangered:

One reason the Kalash culture is going extinct is the lack of proper measures to preserve their language called Kalashamun. Kalashamun is considered as an Indo Aryan

language with a mixture of many other languages like Pasha, Kashmiri, and Shina. Historians have also found a significant amount of Ancient Greek in the Kalasha language. The Kalashamun is one of Pakistan's severely endangered language. The language is not taught in the local schools which is the main reason that Kalasha is going extinct. Akbar Hayat 79, told us during the interview that young Kalash children are mixing many words of Khowar language (which is the mother tongue of the people in Chitral District except the Kalash) in the original Kalash language. The languages are losing its identity to Khowar as some dialects had almost been replaced by Khowar. The language which the elderly Kalash people is utterly un-understandable by Khowar speaking people, however, younger generations do use many familiar words to Khowar language. Abida 24-year-old Kalash girl, who holds a degree of Masters in Physics, told us that sometimes it's very hard for her to get her grandfather's words correctly because of the strength of the accent and difficulty of vocabulary. When the issue of Kalashamun was raised by scholars and many other concerned people some trivial steps to preserve their language were taken by the Pakistani government in 2016. With the help of financial aids from USAID primers of Kalashamun were made and printed, conversations from older people folk tales were also recorded. However, the issue still remains there since the schools' syllabus does not include Kalashamun.

2: Education and Opportunities:

In the Birir valley of Kalash region, there is only one school till tenth grade, after which they have to move to other parts of the district to continue their education. Bumberet valley is comparatively developed from the other two valleys having a high

school and a hospital. Roads and infrastructure of the valleys are extremely primitive. To escape the underdeveloped life in the valleys, there have been many cases reported of Kalash women eloping with local Chitrali men, accepting Islam and leaving their cultural practices behind. Since they are an ethnic and religious minority, very fewer opportunities are provided to them in government sectors. In 2009 Kalash elders demanded quota separate from other minorities for admissions in colleges and universities. They also demanded that in view of the extremely difficult socioeconomic conditions of Kalash, its students must be granted exclusive scholarships or stipends to be able to continue their education. However, these demands are unmet even today. The lack of opportunities and limited seats in many jobs set by the Pakistani constitution is a driving force for them to convert to Islam.

3 Societal Influence:

One of our participants who requested to keep her name anonymous told us a very interesting story about why she accepted Islam. According to her, she had suffered for some disease which was not even recognized by the doctors, for eighteen years. During her constant trips to a health center in Chitral Town, she became friends with a lady nurse. The nurse would tell her many stories related to Islam. She told her that due to her regular prayers five times a day, she has never suffered from any disease. The lady (participant) was very influenced from the nurse and one day she made a promise to God that she will accept Islam as her lifelong religion and would never miss a single prayer in return of her health recovery. Surprisingly, this woman was healed within the first two months of accepting Islam. This is a mere example of many of the surprising stories which we heard

from converted Kalash people.

Due to the dominantly conservative Muslim society of Chitral, the Kalash people are made to believe that the religion they are following is not the right one. Apparently, the influence from society does not look very problematic, but it has been a major factor of influence on Kalash people. Furthermore, some of their religious practices have been opposed by local Chitrali people, because such practices are foreign to Islamic rules. Their burial system was highly opposed by Muslims, therefore, they were conditioned to follow mainstream burial procedure which local Chitrali people follow

4 Conversions:

The topic of conversion is very difficult to conclude. Among the interviews which we conducted many of them said there are no explicit forced conversions today as in the 20th century. However, Muslim religious preachers are constantly preaching Islam in these valleys and the government has not taken this into its consideration. The number of mosques in the region has increased alarmingly in the last three decades. Different participant gave different reasons for the conversion. More common answers were:

1. Better living conditions, since the valley is significantly underdeveloped.
2. Love affairs and marriages with Muslims boys and accepting Islam (even Kalash men who marry Muslim women convert to Islam).

3. Job opportunities.
4. Weekly speeches from Muslims mullahs in mosques.
5. Living with Muslim friends in hostels.

Limitations:

Since the study took place in three different regions of Kalash culture, examining each region carefully as well as explaining the research to the residents. The limitations faced are as follow.

- Not enough budget was provided.
- Less participants involvement due to sensitivity of the subject.
- Very few online resources are available on the Kalash culture/people.
- The difference of language and the translation of the guide was sometimes insignificant

Conclusion:

After a thorough study of Kalash culture it became obvious that their culture is under threat and if not cared on time, will soon get extinct. Both the government and local people have not taken any significant steps to preserve and promote Kalash culture in the region. As a result, their number gets lowered day by day. Kalash culture lacks books in school curriculum regarding their culture, language, and identity. Several times Kalash students have been disqualified in certain scholarships and government jobs because of

their religion. In addition, the predominant Muslims living in Chitral have a significant role in their conversion to Islam and inter-marriages lead both male and female Kalash conversion to Islam. Moreover, Surrounded by the huge Muslim community and the role-playing by preachers, unintentionally allow Kalash people to undermine their beliefs. As a result, their culture is impacted by outside cultures, which integrate into Kalash culture and the culture loses its uniqueness and identity.

Recommendations:

- Educating the young generation about its cultural heritage holds the key to preserving the Kalash culture. In this context, the Provincial Government needs to take a lead in introducing syllabus with the required social and cultural content about the Kalash culture.
- A dedicated section for the promotion and preservation of the Kalash community should be maintained in all national and provincial museums.
- The present circumstances of Kalash community fully justify the grant of stipends and scholarships for Kalash students to acquire quality education.
- The State must take all necessary measures to ensure religious freedoms guaranteed under the constitution. Kalash people must be extended all the support required to protect or renovate their religious and cultural places.

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