

# Unraveling the Challenges Faced by the Kalasha: A Historical Analysis

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**Abstract:** *The Durand Line Agreement was signed in 1893. It gave a new direction to the future of the Kafirs of Hindukush. The Amir was initially denied Kafiristan under this agreement, but upon his protest, the region was granted to him. He dispatched his forces swiftly and took control of the area. The neighbouring Chitral was under the influence of British. British Viceroy Lord Dufferin dispatched a mission under the command of General Lockhart to explore the population and resources of the area, but the primary goal of the British was to restrain Russian advance, not to explore the Hindukush. The invasion of Kafiristan not only transformed the political and administrative setup of the region, but the Kafir majority was reduced to a minority. Historically, the Kalasha have faced all forms of threats including slavery, taxes, conversions, terrorism, encroachments, lack of basic health facilities, and climate change. This article analyse the challenges faced by the Kalasha community in order to ensure their survival.*

**Keywords:** *Kalasha, Chitral, Invasion, Challenges, Survival*

## Introduction

The indigenous Kalasha with a scanty population of about 3000 resides in the three valleys of Birir, Bumburet, and Rumbur in the south of Chitral. Their presence in the region dates to the 8<sup>th</sup> century. In the early medieval era, the Kalasha were the rulers of Chitral. Between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, Raja Wai and Bula Singh, the Kalasha rulers, were defeated by Muslim Kings establishing the Raees dynasty (Shah, 1974). The Kalasha were subjected to Muslim rulers for almost three to five hundred years but were left to govern their internal affairs. The *Mehtars* (rulers of Chitral) consulted the Kalasha as diviners thus their pagan beliefs were tolerated. They paid tribute to the rulers in the form of livestock, honey, walnuts, etc (Maggi, 2001). Young Kalasha women and children were sold into slavery (Loude and Lièvre, 1984). They also suffered forced conversions by Muslim neighbors and were forced to sell valuable resources for very little.

In 1895, after the demarcation of the Durand line, Amir Abdur Rehman attacked the non-Muslim territories. Thousands of people were killed, displaced, and forcefully converted to Islam. Their temples were destroyed, and women were forced to wear veils and give up their traditional costumes.

Kafiristan (land of infidels) was renamed as Nuristan (land of light). Later during the reign of Amir Habibullah, the Kafirs who renounced their faith were allowed to keep their lands while those who refused had their lands confiscated (Gregarion,1969). Many Kalasha migrated across the border and took refuge in the southern valleys of Chitral.

It is widely believed that the Kalasha incorporated the idea of their Greek descent after they were exposed to it by Western visitors. In the Kalasha folklore, their ancestors migrated from Tsyam. This region is yet to be identified. Before the conversion of Kalasha to Islam, they received little attention from the West. George Robertson, a British administrator, in his ethnographic account of the region, *The Kafirs of Hindu Kush*, dismisses the Kalasha as a servile and degraded race (Robertson, 1896). The change in the perception regarding the Kalasha occurred after Schomberg's visit to the valley and his plea for the preservation of its culture. His concern was shared by M. A. Shakur as he signaled the exposition and influence of other cultures on the region. Jettmar's description of the Kalasha valley before conversion as a lost paradise for anthropologists and Siiger's ethnographic study shared the same concern.

Post-colonial travelers and researchers identified themselves with the Kalasha more conveniently. Bealby claims to be amongst his people (the Europeans) when in Kalash (Bealby, 1998). In the early nineteenth century, European linguists who revealed the shared origin of Sanskrit and European languages tried to produce narratives of cultural similarity between the colonizers and the colonized. Although the latter's practices were termed as corrupted. However, in the case of Kalasha, a direct link was established. The reason behind it was that the Kalasha were white, eliminating the racial difference between the Europeans and them.

Dance and music are not only an integral part of the Kalasha culture but have religious value too. On feasts and funerals, music and dances are performed. *Chilam Joshi, Uchal, and Choimus* are the three main Kalasha festivals. The valley is divided into two parts, i.e., the higher places are called *onjesta* while the bottom is *pragata*. Similarly, living things are also divided into these two categories. For example, *Saras* (juniper), goats, and supernatural beings are placed in the first category. Chicken, and *madojaw* (graveyard) are a part of the second category (Cacapardo, 2016). This also applies to humans. Men are placed in *onjesta* while women are in *pragata*. Women's bodies are considered impure and therefore during menstruation and childbirth, they are prohibited to stay at home. Therefore, they spend that time in a separate home known as *bashali*.

But the Kalasha proudly claims, "*Homa istrizha azat asan*" which means our women are free. The Kalasha women claim to enjoy significant freedom as compared to Muslim women. Two practices make them stand out. First, they do not observe purdah which means they are free to travel without any

companion and secondly, they are allowed to speak to men who are not related to them. Due to the latter reason, women have the right to leave their husbands for other men. Although Kalasha women enjoy a certain degree of freedom, they are bound by some rules. Kalasha who chooses not to practice a certain rule are called *nimmim* and are subject to staunch criticism but the only sanction they face is disapproval. Due to this reason, despite conversion to Islam, Kalasha remains Kalasha and continues to live in the same household. They claim to be *azat roi* (free people) and their religion is *azat mashab* (free religion). (Crowley, 2021). On the contrary, Muslims must honor Islamic obligations.

The absence of religious texts and authority has provided the Kalasha the fluidity of interpretation in terms of religious traditions. Since they do not have a centralized religious authority, their religious practice is less prescribed. Religious ceremonies are conducted by young boys (*onjesta moc*). Shamans, known as *dehar* in the local language, interpret the will of the deities and supernatural beings but in their capacity. *Kazis* mimic the role of a central authority, but their influence is limited to a specific area and not the Kalasha region. Even after the conversion of the region to Islam, the scope of creative interpretation remains profoundly intact.

After announcing its affiliation with Pakistan in 1947, the Kalasha were exempted from taxes that they previously paid to the rulers of Chitral. The state of Chitral was officially merged into Pakistan in 1969. Though the Constitution of Pakistan protects minorities, the Kalasha are politically ignored. They have the right to vote in elections at the national, provincial, and local levels and representation at the district level as well. The Kalasha campaign for a minority seat in the National Assembly remains unsuccessful. After the merger, restrictions imposed by the *Mehtars* regarding interference in the Kalasha region were removed. This led to an influx of outsiders into the valley. Adverse effects in the form of encroachments, land grabbing, and cultural appropriation were witnessed (Jan, 1996). It was only after Bhutto visited Chitral, that Kalasha received media attention both at national and international levels (Zaheer, 2011). Anthropologists and researchers visited the region and produced literary works on the Kalasha and their primitive culture. Several institutions were established for the welfare of the Kalasha.

## I. Literature Review

To investigate the historical background of the Kalasha, it is necessary to consult several historical sources, including those about Central Asia, Afghanistan, Dardistan, Kashmir, and India. The existing body of literature about the subject matter is not well disseminated. References to the Kalasha can be found in several historical and anthropological works about Afghanistan, Chitral, or other parts of northern Pakistan primarily Gilgit. The primary sources that will be consulted for this research are mentioned below.

The earliest account of the history of Kalasha Valley is found in Chinese sources from the fifth to eighth century. Later Greek sources are also important. The medieval era sources including the

fourteenth-century *Malfuzat-i-Timuri*, sixteenth-century *Tuzk-i-Baburi* of the Mughal Emperor Zaheer-ud-Din Babur and *Tarikh-i-Rashidi* of Mirza Muhammad Duaghat, the seventeenth-century *Twarikh-i-Hafiz Rehmat Khani* of Khan Roshan Khan and *Tazkirat-al Abrar-Wal-Ashrar* of Akhund Darweza, the twentieth-century *Tarikh-i-Afghanistan* of Abdul Hai Habibi and others. The colonial era sources include government reports, gazetteers, settlement reports, and intelligence reports. British officials including H. G. Raverty, George Scott Robertson, John Biddulph, Reginald Schomberg, and others have contributed to the existing literature on Kalasha. The works of anthropologists such as Karl Jettmar, Augusto Cacopardo, Holzwarth, and Klimburg Max are also a great source of information. Other than these sources folklore, oral, and material history will also contribute to the research. Secondary sources related to the history of Kalasha are briefly discussed below.

In “Fence of Peristan: The Islamization of the Kafirs and their Domestication.” *Archivio per l’Antropologia e la Etnologia* (2016): 88. Alberto M. Cacopardo provides a cartographic representation of the areas where Kafirs resided referring to it as Peristan. After discussing the numerous ethnic and religious minorities in the region, he examines the relationship between the process of Islamization and the role of the state from 1500 BC onwards. Based on the different sources of cartography, he reveals a surprising image of Kafiristan, claiming it to be the once largest abode of Kafirs in Asia, before the process of Islamization in the region. He argues that although Islam has successfully penetrated the region the dream of bringing it under the state has not yet been realized.

Shahzada Hussam-ul-Mulk in his article, “Kalasha Mythology.” *In Cultures of the Hindukush: Selected Papers from the Hindu-Kush Cultural Conference held at Moesgaard 1970*, (1974): 26-30 discusses various aspects of the Kalasha mythology and religious beliefs. He highlights their gods and deities, rituals, festivals, and traditions. Religious practices associated with special occasions including childbirth, harvesting, the concept of Bhashali, and the sacrifices offered for the sake of health, wealth, and happiness to the gods and deities at these occasions are discussed by the author. He also mentions the share of neighboring Muslims in the sacrificial meat.

In the article, “A Note on Rank, Political Leadership, and Government among the Pre-Islamic Kom.” *Cultures of the Hindukush* (1970): 57-63, Richard F. Strand provides details about the social and political structure of the Kafirs. He distinguishes between formal and informal ranks of political leadership. The governmental organization included primary villages, compound villages, and *sazis* (teams). He explains the role of each unit and the decision-making process. He argues that the political system comprised residence and descent-based leadership thus balancing power between both.

In “Dynamics of Cultural Survival of the Kalasha.” *In The Footsteps of Halfdan Siiger* (1948): 115, Taj Khan and Jan Heegard emphasize the role of the Kalasha youth to preserve their culture and language. There is a lack of interest among the youth in documenting oral traditions or developing course material in the Kalasha language hence no progress is recorded. The authors argue that due to education

and access to all forms of media, the youth should play a vital role in transforming the political system of the valley and preserving its unique culture.

G. S. Robertson in his article, "Kafiristan." *The Geographical Journal* 4, no. 3 (1894): 193-217, gives an overview of the Kafiristan region. He discusses the geography, languages, tribal divisions, social structure, religion, and culture of the Kafirs.

Mountstuart Elphinstone in *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubal and its Dependencies in Persia, Tartary, and India: Comprising a view of the Afghaun Nation, and a History of the Dooraunee Monarchy* (London: Richard Bentley, 1842), calls the region *Kuttore* and mentions it cartographically as a part of Afghanistan. He further argues that the Seaposh Caufirs inhabited the southern part of the Hindukush Mountain range. He classifies them as strange and interesting people occupying narrow but rich spots, producing an abundance of grapes. The country of the Caufirs, he argues, is surmounted by snowy summits.

In *Tribes of the Hindoo Koosh* (Lahore: Ali Kamran, 1880), John Biddulph gives an account of the Siah Posh who appears as Aryans to him. Other than the geographical location, he discusses the diverse languages and dialects of the different tribes within the Siah Posh people. The concept of slavery, subjugation, and paying tributes to the ruler of Chitral is also discussed at length.

In *The Red Kafirs* (Peshawar: Peshawar Museum, 1946), M. A. Shakur draws attention to the similarities between the religious practices of Kafirs and the Greeks. He classifies them as the Aryan tribes of Eastern Afghanistan. The Kafirs, according to Shakur, are distrustful of new ideas due to intense conservatism and their isolated nature which is one of the reasons for their downfall. The architectural evidence and the material culture signify the fact that they were higher on the human scale than they are at present, argues Shakur.

*Our Women Are Free: Gender and Ethnicity in the Hindukush* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001) by Wynne Maggi revolves around the phenomena of women's freedom in the Kalasha society. It is one of the defining characteristics of the community. As it is an ethnographic study, the author delves into the life of the Kalasha. She highlights both the joys and complexities of the society. The author argues that the vibrant and unique culture of the Kalasha should be celebrated and preserved.

In *Bolor & Dardistan* (Islamabad: National Institute of Folk Heritage, 1980), Karl Jettmar provides an ethnographic sketch of the geography of the northern region of Pakistan which he calls Bolor. In addition to the geographical location, he highlights the material culture, settlement pattern, and

religion. Regarding the origin of the Kafirs, he argues that they do not have much in common with the Vedic Aryans. He claims that they are closer to the Caucasians. Also, the Dardic vocabulary is non-Indo-European.

Kashif Ali in “Cultural Heritage and Extremism in Pakistan: Re-focusing on the Kalasha of (Chitral) Pakistan” *Pakistan Social Sciences Review* (2020): 988-1000, discusses how the Kalasha community experienced suppression as a result of the rise of Talibanization and religious extremism. The War on Terror resulted in the proliferation of extremist ideologies and the emergence of numerous terrorist organizations, particularly in the tribal agencies and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region. The Tehrik-i-Taliban, also known as the TTP, issued a threat to the Kalasha community, urging them to either convert their religious beliefs or face the possibility of experiencing genocide. He further argues the way the Kalasha community is actively striving for the preservation of their cultural identity.

In “Pakistan: Indigenous Kalash Tribe Under Threat from Muslim Religious Groups.” Asian Human Rights Commission, (2016), Arsalan Barijo explains the way Kalasha settlements are being rapidly encircled by a growing Muslim population, leading to socioeconomic deprivation and forced conversions. This has also led to Kalasha women marrying outside the community, eventually converting to Islam. The Afghan conflict and Islamization efforts have also posed dangers to the Kalasha's survival. Post 9/11, the situation has been tense, leading to an existential crisis for the Kalasha. The pressure from the dominant religion is causing changes in the behavioral patterns of the Kalasha people, especially their future, and their children. They are not taught about their culture, religion, or history in schools, where most teachers are Muslims. The author also argues that their traditional way of life is under threat as they have become less celebratory of their religious festivities and rituals.

Max Klimburg in “The Arts and Societies of the Kafirs of the Hindu Kush.” *Asian Affairs* 35, no. 3 (2004): 365-386, highlights the triad of culture which he believes can be traced back to Indo-Iranian beliefs. He argues that the Kafirs residing in the Hindu Kush region demonstrated considerable cultural diversity, characterized by the presence of three discrete "primitive" Kafir societies i.e., Waigul and Askhun, Parun, and Kati, each with distinct attributes and belief systems. He also implies that these cultural differences might have had a role in providing resilience to the Kafir societies when confronted with external adversities, such as Pashtun incursions and the arrival of Islam in the area.

In “The Origin of the Kafir of the Hindu Kush” *The Geographical Journal* 7, no. 1 (1896): 42-49, Thomas H. Holdich discusses the origin of the Kafirs residing in the Hindu Kush region. He argues that the Kafirs assert their Greek ancestry, however, research indicates that the Kafirs are potentially the descendants of a mixed race, predominantly of Tajik descent, who initially inhabited the lowlands of

Badakhshan. He also explains the influences of Zoroastrianism, Brahmanism, etc. but due to the absence of a written language among this group poses a significant obstacle in tracing their origins. He also explains the potential connection between the Nysaeen population of Swat and Bajaur as the inscriptions discovered in the region posit potential links to the ancient Greek civilization.

In “Religion as a Space for Kalash Identity: A Case Study of Village Bumburet in Kalash Valley, District Chitral” *World Applied Sciences Journal* 29, no. 3 (2014): 426-432, Irum, S., H. R. Chaudhry, and A. Mohyuddin discuss the role of religion as a tool for establishing the identity of the Kalasha. After surviving the trauma of colonialism and religious extremism, the new threat to their culture is modernization and technological advancement. The conversion to Islam, according to the author, has not impacted the Kalasha culture as those who accept Islam form a separate community. The converts although have taken great care in eliminating all material culture that was associated with their previous Kalasha identity.

## 2. Methodology

This research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Kalasha community. To analyse the historical, cultural, and social aspects of the evolution of Kalasha community after the invasion of Amir Abdur Rehman, an interdisciplinary approach is adopted. The research is a qualitative study. Primary sources including archives, oral history, ethnographies, interviews, and surveys are used in addition to secondary sources. Data in the form of historical documents, archives, and manuscripts is utilized. While conducting fieldwork in the valley, direct engagement with the community using participant observation techniques helped in documenting their perception of the culture, traditions, and social dynamics of the Kalasha Valleys. Oral traditions and folklore will be used as primary tools to ascertain the history. This research is aimed at bridging the gap between historical records and contemporary ethnography.

## 3. Discussion and Conclusion

The Kalasha region holds a great deal of fascination for the west and is a source of foreign investment. The Pakistani government realizing this fact has imposed a ban on Muslim evangelists in the region. In contrary to this, the curriculum taught in Kalasha schools is based on Islamic ideology. Similarly, Muslim teachers propagated Islamic principles and denounce Kalasha practices. To deal with this situation, the government announced to replace Muslim teachers with Kalasha and

the course on Islamic studies with ethics. This was far from being implemented as the directives of the Ministry of Minorities were dismissed by the district and provincial governments. (Skidmore, 2021).

Due to the US military operations in Afghanistan, a huge influx of Taliban was observed in Chitral. This resulted in an existential crisis for the Kalasha as they were non-Muslims. Taliban announced a jihad against the Kalasha and Ismailis of Chitral and sought the help of the sunni population. The Taliban also attacked Kalasha shepherds. Two of them were slaughtered by the Taliban while rest fled away. Their sheep was herded across the border to Nuristan. (Correspondent, The News, 2016). Similarly, a Greek teacher Lerounis was kidnapped and was returned after a ransom of \$1 million was paid.

The control of the economy of the region by non-Kalash has been a challenge for the local people. Their land, forests and resources are in control of outsiders. Similarly, the hotels and guests houses in the region are also operated by them. The role of Kalasha is only limited to those of a waiter or labourer. The previously economically sufficient valleys are now dependent on outside forces. The commercialization of the region has rapidly increased after the construction of the Lowari tunnel. It has not only decreased the traveling distance but has exposed the Kalasha to the outside world conveniently.

Deforestation is another serious threat faced by the Kalasha. The livelihood of the Kalasha is heavily dependent upon the forests. Not only is it a source of fuel for them but several cultural and religious practices are also dependent on them. The wood is used to curve deities. However, the claims of non-Kalasha residents on the Silver Oak forests have been alarming for the locals. A complaint was filed by the Kalasha in 2017 in this regard. In response to this complaint, the land revenue department declared the forests as *shamilaat* which means that the Kalasha has no exclusive right over the forest area and other stakeholders had an equal share. (Skidmore, 2021).

Another important issue for the survival of the Kalasha people is lack of health care facilities. Due to the remote location of the Kalasha valleys, the people are deprived of basic health care. A Basic Health Unit is established in the valley, but the facilities provided are substandard and medical staff including a doctor is rarely found. The nearest medical facility is available at 40 kilometres in the Chitral city. Access to which is cumbersome job due to the bad condition of the roads. The situation worsens in winters when roads are blocked due to snowfall. The infant and maternity mortality rate is therefore high in the valley. (Din, 2011). The Kalasha practice of not burying their dead has been a matter of hygiene and security for the valley. The pungent smell of the dead bodies is detrimental to the environment of the valley and displeasing for the tourists. Also, wild animals prey on these bodies and are a threat for the people living nearby. Due to the issue of hygiene and orders from the government, the Kalasha now bury their dead.

Historically, the indigenous Kalasha has faced all forms of threats to their cultural survival including slavery, taxes, conversions, terrorism, encroachments, lack of basic health facilities and state

sponsored survival programs. Over the time, due to conversions the Kalasha, their status has been reduced to a religious minority. Due to these challenges, cultural survival and distinctiveness of the Kalasha has been impacted negatively. Assimilation and the demand to create a homogenous Islamic community has also proved harmful for the Kalasha. The government need to give the Kalasha a distinguished identity as a group of indigenous people and their rights should be acknowledged accordingly. Religion and culture both go hand in hand for the Kalasha. Their association with the region of Kalash is significant because their ideology as their religious practices are not limited to temples but the geography of the region. To protect the Kalasha belief system, they need to be provided with safety and facilities within the region of Kalash.

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