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Chilim Jusht

A hundred beats

By Fatima Bhutto

Six hours after we reached Bumburet, deep in the Kalash Valley, there was an earthquake. Ok, it was actually a tremor but it was very frightening indeed. I was sitting on a takht in the open field, staring up at the magnificent shale mountains that surrounded us, when I noticed that the mountains were moving out of focus. The ground had started to shake and looking around me, knowing that I was miles away from cellular service and functioning electricity but very close to some truly large mountains, I was convinced it was over. I was going to die, having trekked all the way from Karachi to Peshawar to Chitral and then Bumburet without ever witnessing what I had come to see: the Kalash spring festival, Chilim Jusht.

Strangely, no one felt the tremor except us city folk. The rest of the Kalash were out gathering flowers that day to mark the start of spring.

The Kalash people, said to be descendants of Alexander the Great's troops and the smallest ethnic group in Pakistan, are fast disappearing. There are an estimated 12 madrassahs running shop in Bumburet alone and a drove of Tablighis have moved in with the express purpose of showing the Kalash the light. There are also Jamat ul Islami madrassahs operating in the area and though the figures are murky it seems they are doing some proper missionary work.

More than 70 per cent of the purported ten thousand existing Kalash have already been converted to Islam. Why they choose to convert is usually a matter of economic or social gain and the subject remains a touchy one for both sides. Saifullah Jan, a Kalash leader, has been widely quoted as saying "If any Kalash converts to Islam, they cannot live among us anymore. We keep our identity strong". Many locals, former Kalash themselves, told us that the Kalash have made a strict point of keeping to themselves and that converts are abandoned by their families and communities and are forced to move away from their villages. But Shingirai, a 60-year-old Kalash grandmother, swatted away rumours of compulsory excommunication and isolation.

Shingirai has two sons and two daughters, one of whom became a Muslim. I asked her why her daughter converted and she waved her hand above her head and said something in Chitrali that I could finally understand "kismet". I asked what happened after her daughter converted and Shingirai told me that she comes to Karkal, their village, to visit often and that they see each other at least once a week. "Didn't you cut your ties with her?" I asked through the translator and once again Shingirai said something I could understand. She shook her head "Of course not. That's my daughter. She's my jiggar".

Saghir Ahmed, a fresh-faced twenty two year old madressah instructor from Chitral who teaches a mixed group of young boys and girls in the village of Batric, was another surprise. After the hushed stories we'd heard of clandestine jihadis roaming the valley out for Pagan blood, Saghir was very disappointing indeed. When asked if he thought it was good that so many Kalash were finally converting to Islam he answered openly and directly, "There's no prejudice in our society here. Naturally, we would feel it's best to be a Muslim but the Kalash also believe that about their way of life. They are good, kind people. We respect them and their children. There's no religious confrontation here; here we live in harmony". Saghir differentiated between the more intolerant elements in the area, who are very vocal against the dancing that takes place during Kalash festivals and the apple wine they press for the occasions, and Muslims like himself who are fulfilling what they see as a religious duty without actually stepping on anyone else's toes.

On the second day of the spring festival, the Kalash women fetch and distribute milk. It is the Kalash women who seem to do everything around here. In their black robes and colourful headdresses, which resemble the beadwork of Native American tribes, they are the most visible members of their society. Kalash men, who look and dress similarly to the rest of the men in Bumburet, fall quite easily to the backdrop.

Barawhost, who doesn't know what her name means but only that her mother chose for her a 'strong' name, works to feed her family by embroidering Kalash woollen cloth and beading necklaces. She said each intricate piece of handicraft takes one month to complete and sells from Rs500-5,000 in the gift shops around Karkal that cater to the many Kalash-curious tourists. Like many other Kalash women Barawhost is aware of what a unique piece of Pakistani heritage she occupies and swans around her house showing me the many peculiar items she sews and weaves for sale. As I'm being given the guided tour, I notice a piece of paper cut out from a film magazine and stuck on the walls -- it is Andy Warhol inspired square snapshots of Shahrukh Khan and Karishma Kapoor.

Barawhost introduces me to her youngest daughter, a beautiful girl with grey eyes called Gulshimar who attends a local government school where she learns Urdu, English, and the traditional Kalash language. I ask Gulshimar what she wants to be when she grows up and she hides behind her mother before answering "a policewoman".

That's not half as strange as it might sound. The Kalash, especially their women, are genuine enigmas. Many Kalash women travel to Chitral and train as police officers, serving across the northern parts of the Frontier province. Kalash women, mind you, not Kalash men -- though they certainly enlist as well. They vote in elections, enthusiastically so, and list ZAB as their favourite politician, but at the same time they adhere strictly to their own system of purdah. Menstruating and post-natal women are separated from the tribe and placed in a house like area called a Bashaleni where they remain until considered 'pure' enough to rejoin their communities. Trespassing the bounds of a Bashaleni means that anyone, Kalash or not, is then unable to enter the main village area. Marriages are conducted with great ease and freedom -- young women decide whom they wish to marry and weddings are celebrated on the third and fourth days of Chilim Jusht -- yet it is the village elder, a man, who ultimately rules the roost. This in a society where men are almost entirely invisible. It is refreshingly odd.

Leaving aside a potentially apocalyptic religious take over and the quirky gender politics of Bumburet, it is the tolerance that struck me -- an outsider -- the most about the Kalash valley. Kalash and Muslims alike have depended on each other for sustenance, trade, and survival for years and it is this functional and practical harmony that is threatened by an over zealous movement to homogenise Pakistan. I hope to return next year for Chilim Jusht; earthquakes, tremors, and Tablighis permitting, of course.