

The Promoting Heritage Education through Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Kalasha Valleys of Pakistan

Ghiasuddin Pir & Meeza Ubaid
THAAP

Abstract

The current paper addresses the inherent contradictions between mainstream education and its implementation among marginalized communities whilst providing examples of how some of these contradictions may be tackled. In November 2015, THAAP, the only UNESCO accredited NGO under the Convention 2003 from Pakistan, initiated the process of community-based inventorying (CBI) of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) among the Kalasha community residing in Mumuret, Biri, and Rukmu valleys located in the district Chitral, North-Western Pakistan. Out of a total population of nearly 221 million, the Kalasha are one of the smallest religious minorities of Pakistan, with a population of approximately four thousand people. The prior efforts led to the eventual inscription of Suri Jagek: Meteorological and Astronomical practice of observing the sun, moon, stars, and shadows on UNESCO's list of ICH in Need of Urgent Safeguarding in 2018. Over the previous decade, with formal modes of knowledge dissemination evolving, it is reputed that more than 99% of the Kalasha youth attend schools. This results in a proportionally high literacy rate compared with their Muslim counterparts; unfortunately, 'education' and 'literacy' for the Kalasha have also led to cultural amnesia.

The paper highlights the organization's success stories, challenges, and further opportunities for exploring ICH and its relationship with formal education structures.

Primary themes to be highlighted include:

1. The binary opposition between the benefits of becoming 'educated' and learning about one's own culture;
2. The structural demands for religious conversation and the role of education in countering such pursuits;
3. The lack of advocacy and structural involvement of ICH related subjects in formal education curriculums and exploring ways to advocate with the Government;
4. Use local content and its integration informally taught classes in the pre and post-pandemic era (Challenges and opportunities).

INTRODUCTION TO THE KALASHA COMMUNITY

The Kalasha are an indigenous community residing in three valleys named Mumuret, Biri, and Rukmu in District Chitral, North-Western Pakistan. In November 2015, THAAP, the only UNESCO accredited NGO under the Convention 2003 from Pakistan, initiated the process of community-based inventorying (CBI) of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) among the Kalasha

community residing in Mumuret, Biriu, and Rukmu valleys located in the district Chitral, North-Western Pakistan. Out of a total population of nearly 221 million, the Kalasha are one of the smallest religious minorities of Pakistan, with a population of approximately four thousand people.

Providing a snapshot introduction to the community is difficult for the diverse narratives associated with them. These words are echoed by Major John Biddulph during his position as a political agent in Chitral. In 1878, he famously wrote:

"Between Chitral, Afghanistan, and the Hindoo Koosh, the maps show a large tract of land of the unknown country under the name of Kaffiristan, concerning whose inhabitants the wildest conjectures have been formed."

This only highlights that conjecture about the Kalasha is not new. Religious and ethnic affiliations have been long disputed with numerous conjectures ranging from the Kalasha being offspring of the deserters of Alexander of Macedon's army to being indigenous to the region exist. However, basic geographical features include each valley with a river running through its core. The area is rich in cultural as well as biological diversity. Even in present times, the Kalasha and the Muslim communities residing in the area use the local land for sustenance; agriculture and animal husbandry form an integral part of the subsistence economy. The main flora and fauna of the area include consists of pine (*pinus wallichiana*), chilgoza (*Pinus gerardiana*), juniper, deodar (*Cedrus deodara*), and holly/holm oak (*Quercus baloot*). Fruit production is prominent with fruits such as mulberries, apples, pears, and apricots being a regular feature of peoples diets and nuts and walnuts being considered a delicacy, honey and a wide variety of wild mushrooms (*morchella esculenta*, *morchella vulgaris* and *morchella deliciosa*) normally found at high pastures.

THAAP, in collaboration with UNESCO, funded by the Embassy of Switzerland, has worked towards inclusive documentation processes of forty-five intangible cultural heritage from the five listed ICH domains. Furthermore, additional domains, including traditional games and sports, traditional medicine, and agricultural practices, were added, keeping in mind their connection with the community.

The practical applications of this documentation included the formation of the first-ever online ICH inventory of Pakistan. This inventory served as a pre-requisite for the preparation of the nomination dossier and the eventual inscription of Suri Jagek: *Meteorological and Astronomical practice of observing the sun, moon, stars, and shadows on UNESCO's list of ICH in Need of Urgent Safeguarding in 2018.*²

2 UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage. *Suri Jagek (observing the sun), traditional meteorological and astronomical practice based on the observation of the sun, moon and stars in reference to the local topography*. Available online at:- <https://ich.unesco.org/en/USL/suri-jagek-observing-the-sun-traditional-meteorological-and-astronomical-practice-based-on-the-observation-of-the-sun-moon-and-stars-in-reference-to-the-local-topography-01381>

HERITAGE EDUCATION AND CHALLENGES AT HAND

As stated previously, it is difficult to reach a conclusive homogenous understanding of the Kalasha people through prior texts and even first-hand interviews. Traditionally, knowledge dissemination within the community was carried out orally at traditional ascribed spaces such as altars for boys and Bashali's (maternity homes) for girls. The home and elders within the homes were the 'sites' of knowledge that children attained practical information from. With the advent of formalized educational structures within the area, there has been an exponential increase in the number of formally 'literate' and 'educated' Kalasha people; unfortunately, instead of strengthening the Kalasha identity, it has played a primary role in creating cultural amnesia. Therefore, keeping in mind the challenges at hand, THAAP, in collaboration with UNESCO and funded by the Government of Switzerland, aimed to address this concern by promoting ideas pertaining to and developing resource material that could promote heritage-based education leading to the strengthening of the Kalasha identity.

According to the accepted definitions, heritage education refers to *"a pedagogical process in which students are able to learn about heritage resources,"* it brings culturally conscious and relevant content to students in schools that enable them to understand their culture - past and present, and also highlights the evolutionary processes leading to the development of their current identity. Although a controversial claim to make, the primary content, curriculum, and pedagogical techniques have led to a weakening of the Kalasha identity due to its role to push for a singular monolithic national identity promoted through the national and provincial curriculums. One such example is that Islamic Studies is taught to all primary school students and becomes an optional course with either 'Islamic Studies or ethics.' Practically speaking, however, the former is mostly taught with the latter not being offered due to a lack of trained teachers in the subject.

Furthermore, the total number of schools catering to only Kalasha students are few and far between. Bumburet has three Kalasha schools, Rumbur has two, and Birir has one. These five schools are unable to cater to the entire Kalasha population, and hence, the majority of the Kalasha children also attend the Government primary schools. Out of the five total schools, only one school, i.e., the Kalasha Dur school in Bumburet, a community-run school initially established by the Greek Volunteers, teaches students using the Kalasha language as a medium of instruction. The other schools use the *Khowar* language as a medium of instruction, which is the commonly spoken language in the region.

The third challenge included developing good quality content (already done in the past) but its lack of implementation. This was primarily because a 'Kalasha Studies' subject does not exist in the national and provincial curriculum. Hence, there is a binary opposition between spending time on subjects that will help the student 'progress' in life and help them through matriculation or learning about a subject that should ideally be ingrained in their social ethos. Therefore, prior interventions have been restricted to unsustainable efforts to regularly carry out co-curricular cultural activities.

WORK CARRIED OUT AND PRIOR EDUCATION AMONG THE KALASHA COMMUNITY

Over the previous decade, with formal modes of knowledge dissemination evolving, it is reputed that more than 99% of the Kalasha youth attend schools. This results in a proportionally high literacy rate when compared with their Muslim counterparts, but unfortunately, 'education' and 'literacy' for the Kalasha have also led to cultural amnesia. "Children start going to schools when they have to learn to do useful things" is a statement uttered by a Kalasha elder Krishna Mocik, and has subsequently been echoed by many community members. The current paper addresses the inherent contradictions between mainstream education and its implementation among marginalized communities whilst providing examples of how some of these contradictions may be tackled.

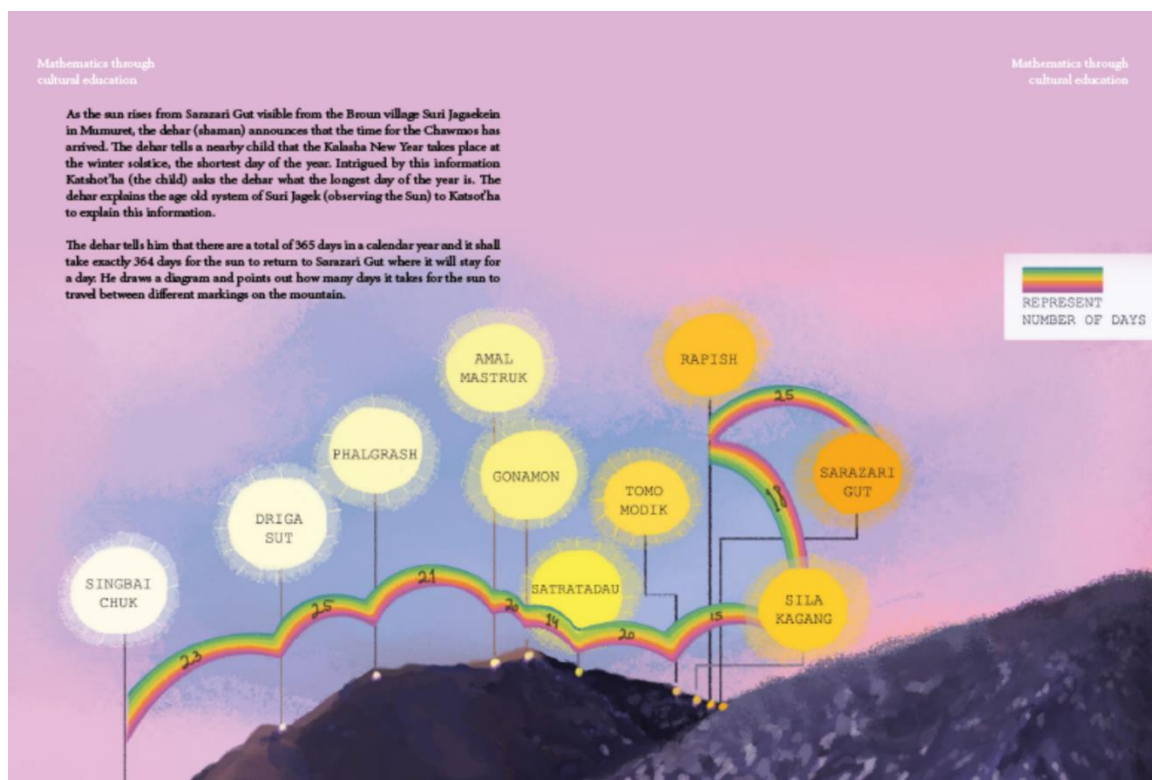
One strategy promoted heritage education through the production of educational content that could become a part of the pre-existing government-approved curriculum. The challenge at hand was to develop content that does not move to the peripheries of formal education as similar past initiatives have proved to be unsustainable due to only finding a place as 'extra-curricular' in schools. These extra-curricular cultural education activities have been valuable; however, they have been restricted to voluntary work by school teachers and elders and pushed to after-school hours, leading to reduced levels of commitment from primary stakeholders. The challenge was to form a nexus between utilitarian and cultural growth.

SOME EXAMPLES OF THE DEVELOPED CONTENT CAN BE SEEN BELOW

Using Mathematics as a subject already being taught, in collaboration with the community, THAAP developed basic mathematics questions in a culturally relevant manner.

EXAMPLE I

Suri Jagek is the traditional meteorological, and astronomical practice of observing the sun, moon, stars and shadows was inscribed on UNESCO's USL list in 2018. Sun observation from observatories traces the trajectory of the sun rising above a mountain every day. Technically the sun takes exactly 365 days to return to the exact spot from where it has risen today. Similarly, different locations associated with the position of the rising sun have their defined names, and the mathematical calculation of the sun traveling from one location to the next is set, and all of them add to 365 days. Through this baseline information, the students were introduced to an age-old practice and solved mathematics questions. Excerpts from the textbook can be seen below: -



EXAMPLE II

Further Mathematics questions were posed using traditional units of measurements teaching multiplication and division. Rhash Giirik is an age-old practice of grain counting and storage. Baskets of three-set sizes were used as measurement systems upon which division and multiplication questions were posed. An excerpt from the textbook can be seen below:



EXAMPLE III

The language was inherently connected to local folk stories. These oral stories were recorded, and then keeping in mind stories that provide a particular message was translated into English and Urdu and provided as comprehension exercises for students.

The textbook itself was written by school teachers in the Kalashamondr language and only then translated into English. This was work produced by the community and the community, with

the external organization only providing structural support.

COVID-19 RESPONSE:

Over a hundred countries have implemented nationwide closures of educational institutes. This has impacted nearly half of the world's student population (UNESCO, 2020).³ Indigenous communities the world-over have suffered from a proportionally higher level of disruption in education when compared to their counterparts living in the same countries.

Conversations with Kalasha school teachers have highlighted that between April and August, there were serious challenges in imparting any formal education to students. When talking to Bakhtawar Shah, the principal of the Kalasha Dur school in Bumburet, he stated:

“We have tried to start a home-schooling initiative but to little avail. The problem is that the parents of the children themselves are not equipped to teach the content we currently teach at school. They are unaware of English and in some cases Urdu as well. Even if they can speak some of the languages, they are not literate”

Furthermore, a challenge highlighted was that online classes are impossible to conduct as despite there not being a shortage of mobile phones in the Kalasha valleys, there is no reliable internet connection.

In reference to the response, it was highlighted that some of the content listed in the textbooks was verbally explained to the parents of the students. Suri Jagek, particularly is a practice that students have learned from the village elders and plans of incorporating math-based problem-solving questions within such practices are being discussed. Similarly grain storage as well as narrating folk stories are being narrated to students in times where time away from school might be a blessing in disguise. As schools re-open perhaps a bridging of the gap between traditional and modern forms of education may take place.

Conclusion

The current initiatives are innovative and the first of their kind for the Kalasha community. The results have been fruitful as the developed content can be tailored to fit the pre-existing curriculum without added resources being spent on them. However, the need to formulate a policy and implement a Kalasha Studies curriculum as a subject for the Kalasha people should be provided as an option within the national and provincial government. Sustained advocacy on that front is on-going.

³ UNESCO. 2020. *Covid-19 Education Disruption and Response*. Available online at:- <https://en.unesco.org/news/covid-19-educational-disruption-and-response>