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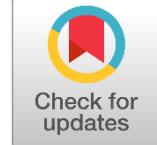
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# Deconstructing the Fable of Inclusive National Identity in Pakistan: Account of Dwindling Kalasha Indigenous Identity in Chitral

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## ABSTRACT

Ideological and Cultural identities are commonly observed as a few of the integral facets of human societal identity variables, but in Pakistan, ideological alterations are oftentimes equated as binary to the commonly shared notion of Islamic identity. The animistic ideological identity of the Kalasha community in Chitral holds a global prominence and recognition that dates back to centuries, but in recent decades their indigenous identity and norms have been under a consistent spell of exclusivist identity projection, leaving their distinctive identity norms and animistic cultural values at the peril of hovering extinction. The study initially builds on the ongoing religiously influenced national identity formation in Pakistan aiming further to highlight the systematic causes of the Kalasha community's endangered indigenous identity decline, using the lens of Identity Subordination theory. The paper aims to unveil how exclusive identity formation through incentivized stratagems is being perpetuated against the community by the dominant religious Sunni (Clerical) group. The paper finally proposes the need for the adoption and implementation of inclusive attitudes and actions, along with much-needed measures both at the grassroots and state level for combatting the ethno-terrorism carried out against the Kalasha identity and indigenous culture.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Norms and values are acquired endowments that have a strong link to national identity but in heterogeneous societies like Pakistan, such distinct identity variations are oftentimes viewed as hostile to the commonly shared notion of national identity or greater cohesion. The insinuation of indigenous values and normative discrepancies shared by minorities in Pakistan remains to be contested and polarized. Notwithstanding, national identity, norms, and

cultural values are considered some of the important aspects of human societal identity variables, not to exclude mother tongue, religion, birthplace, customs, and traditions.

National identity is an intricate and multifaceted concept that plays a crucial role in shaping the collective consciousness of a group or nation (Smith, 1991). In Pakistan, a country characterized by its rich diversity of ethnicities, languages, religions, and cultural traditions, the notion of Islamic ideology/identity emerged as the core identity that historically has been central to its formation and prior independence movement. However, the narrative of an inclusive Pakistan, founded on the principles of equality and social cohesion, has so far been perpetuated through fables and myths by the ruling religious and political class, since her independence.

To fathom, it is essential to critically examine and deconstruct these narratives to understand the complexities and contradictions embedded within Pakistan's national

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identity. To comprehend the origins of the inclusive identity myth, it is imperative to first reflect on the birth of Pakistan as an independent state in 1947. The vision of its founding father, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, was to establish a nation where Muslims could freely practice their faith and live in harmony with other communities, who would have the liberty to practice their religious practices (Jalal, 2007). These inclusive tenets were enshrined in the country's founding documents too, which guaranteed equal rights and opportunities to all citizens, including the minorities of the country, regardless of their religious or ethnic backgrounds (Government of Pakistan, 1956).

However, as time has passed, the realization of an inclusive national identity has faced numerous obstacles and a wide array of criticism from a range of actors. Factors such as ethnic tensions, religious extremism, regional disparities, and political power struggles have challenged the adhered set of ethos of an inclusive Pakistan (Varshney, 2002). Subsequently, these issues have given rise to questions about the essential nature of the national identity of Pakistan and its inclusivity, as marginalized groups continue to face subordination, discrimination, marginalization, and exclusion across the country (Khan, 2019). Moreover, the persistence of sectarian violence, forced conversions, and cultural assimilation policies against marginalized communities have further complicated the narrative of an inclusive national identity (Taseer, 2017). These realities also raise critical concerns about the state's ability to foster social inclusion and provide a sense of belonging to the minority and marginalized citizens of the country.

This research paper draws on the case study of a minority Kalasha community indigenous identity and cultural norms decline in Chitral, through scholarly perspectives, unstructured interviews, and empirical evidence. By examining the case study of the indigenous community, I have aimed to unravel the complexities that lie beneath the surface and shed light on the gaps between the idealized vision of an inclusive national identity of Pakistan and the ground realities experienced by its diverse populace. The paper also attempts to unveil how systematic conversion, in the form of incentivized conversion, is underway in the region, which is a clear negation of the notion of inclusive national identity in Pakistan.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The fable/myth of an inclusive national identity in Pakistan is a topic of utmost importance in understanding the nation's sociopolitical fabric and the state of minorities in the country. By critically examining its origins, manifestations, and limitations, we can strive for a more nuanced understanding of Pakistan's national identity and work towards building a society that truly embraces diversity, fosters inclusivity, and upholds the rights and dignity of minority communities.

### A Historical Outlook of the Kalasha in Chitral

The Kalasha community is an indigenous ethnic group located in the Chitral District, in the northern region of Pakistan's Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province. As per their popularly held belief, they are alleged to be the descendants of the leftover soldiers of Alexander the Great, who invaded the Indian subcontinent back in the 4th century BCE. Although other studies negate their popular claim of being

ethnically Greek in origin. However, the Kalasha have their own distinct culture, and language which links them to neighbouring Persian Dardic origin, with animistic religious traditions, which are supposed to have been passed down for centuries.

The community reside in three valleys namely Bumburet, Rumbur, and Birir which are also known as the Kalasha Valleys in Chitral, while popularly referred to as 'Kafaristan' across the country. The valleys share a 380-kilometer permeable border with Nuristan, neighboring Afghanistan in the north and west. The Kalasha are one of the oldest indigenous communities in Pakistan, and arguably one of the few surviving indigenous cultures in the world, according to various international historical surveys and reports. As per the accounts of Chitral history, they were the first community, who invaded and ruled the region for years.

The Kalasha have a strong connection to their land and have traditionally been farmers and herders, by profession. Their religious beliefs have historically centered around nature and ancestor worship, and they have a complex system of rituals and festivals that continues throughout the year, including the Joshi festival, which marks the beginning of spring and is considered one of the most important events in the Kalasha calendar. Other prominent festivals of the community are Choimush and Uchal which are celebrated in the months of winter and summer, accordingly. They also have distinct Dardic, with a mix of Koh language, an altogether different language, and traditional dress for the women which they wear all year that includes wearing a headgear adorned with cowrie shells, glaringly unique and historical.

In addition, the Kalasha Community is characterized by high linguistic diversity. Most languages in the area belong to the Indo-European language family, but to different branches of this family: there are Dardic, Iranian, Koh, and Indic languages, and are particularly resemble the Dardic division. They are physically and genetically very distinct from the populations of the Subcontinent and Southern Asia in general, with blue eyes and blonde hair, a trait that backs their claim of being from Greek ethnicity. However, the genetic distance of the community to other South Asian populations can be caused "recently" by isolation or "founder effects"; limited intermarriage with outsiders can lead to a genetic profile quite different from others, (Johnsen U et. Al, 2009). The existing Kalasha culture is an illustration that reclaims how the region has been a home for the small groups of people who have survived persecution and were able to prolong it over the decades.

In addition, they are a diverse community, with a distinctive culture that encapsulates its identity. However, the foundational tablets of their religious identity and beliefs are largely centered on the themes of onjesta and paragata i.e. which signifies purity and impurity. This phenomenon is patent in most of the domains of their life conduct. They regard high mountains, lakes, green pastures; cooking areas, god's deities, fairies, Holy sanctuaries and jestik~han (worship places) are onjesta i.e. things they believe are pure. Subsequently, females, their menstruation and maternity homes 'bashalini', graveyard, and evil spirits but are considered paragata i.e. impure, and specific places are allocated for women during their menstrual cycles (Sheikh E, 3013).

In the late 19th century, the Kalasha people came into contact with British colonial forces and their locally backed protégés, as they attempted to convert them into their mainstream religions. In the following years the community resistance was considerably limited, as they entered the phase of vulnerability with their traditional beliefs and practices witnessed a spell of soft assimilation, although they were able to survive the mass conversion spell. According to Smith (2017), during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, various external influences, including Islamic missionaries and neighboring Muslim communities, attempted to convert the Kalasha people. The underlying motivation behind these attempts was rooted in the belief that their polytheistic faith was incompatible with the Islamic identity of the region that needed to be submerged.

### **Identity Subordination Theory**

The Identity Subordination Theory is a social theory that focuses on how certain social identities are subordinated within a broader social context. This theory suggests that dominant groups exert power and control over subordinate (minority) groups by devaluing their identities and relegating them to inferior positions within society. According to West and Fenstermaker (1995), the Identity Subordination Theory is rooted in the concept of social stratification, which refers to the division of society into hierarchically organized groups based on social characteristics such as race, identity, gender, class, and sexuality.

The process of identity subordination could involve multiple mechanisms, as outlined by Risman (2004). One mechanism is the construction and reinforcement of a dominant ideology that legitimizes and maintains existing power structures i.e. the dominant Islamic ideology in Pakistan. These ideologies often perpetuate stereotypes and reinforces the idea that certain identities are superior and others as inferior. For instance, racial ideologies have been used to justify the subordination of racial minority groups throughout history (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004). Another mechanism of identity subordination could be institutionally driven. Discriminatory practices and policies within formal institutions, such as education, employment, and criminal justice, and on informal accounts can systematically detriment subordinate groups (Pager & Shepherd, 2008). The subsequent discrimination as a result of subordination disseminates social inequalities and reinforces the subordinate status of marginalized identities.

Moreover, the social construction or the reinforcement of the already existing popularly held identity plays a significant role in the identity subordination of the minority group or class. West and Fenstermaker (1995) maintain that identities are not static or inherent but are socially constructed and oftentimes reinforced through interaction and discourse. Dominant groups have the power to define and influence the identities of minority groups, thus shaping social perceptions and hierarchies, based on their dominantly held existing ideology or religious identity. The consequences of identity subordination are comprehensive and evident. Subordinate or minority groups often experience marginalization including limited access to resources, opportunities, and social rewards (Winker & Degele, 2011). They may face discrimination, stigmatization, and social exclusion, which can have detrimental effects on their well-being and their identities in the larger context (Krieger, 2012). Additionally, other prominent consequences could be in the form of identity crisis, as oftentimes

projection of subordination can contribute to the continuance of inequality as subordinate group members may come to believe in their inferiority i.e. Inferiority complex and crisis related to identity (Crocker & Major, 1989).

The focus of this research is to uncover and study how there exists a causal relationship between the apparent decline of the Kalasha population, and their indigenous cultural and normative values, in light of the Identity subordination theory, as a result of the exclusive identity projection in the region. The ways through which subordination occurs in the region is primarily aimed at soft assimilation with an emphasis on numerous socio-political factors, most prominently through economic incentives, social isolation, and religious fundamentalism, carried out by the mainstream fanatic religious groups. Subsequently, through incentivizing marriages and offering land incentives the religious and cultural identities of the Kalasha community are targeted, which dates back to the legacy of colonialism.

### **The Decline of Kalasha Indigenousness and its link to Coloniality**

The Kalasha people have a rich cultural heritage dating back thousands of years. They follow their unique polytheistic and animistic religious mythology, which mainly comprises various rituals, festivals, and traditional practices. However, over the years, the community has faced pressures of conversion and subordination from external religious groups, particularly from the mainstream Sunni clerical class, resulting in the decline of their indigenous identity.

Among the Kalasha, religious rituals and beliefs are held to be the core element of their cultural identity. Subsequently, like other societies of the world, in their tradition, religious identity is reinforced both socially and culturally and transmitted to the next generation, which dates back centuries. Notwithstanding, the religious faith of the people is very much linked with animism and primarily based on shared mythologies, which substantially center around the existence of a creator God but also subordinate deities with their precise roles. Shamans for example they believe, play a specific and dominant role, and fairies and spirits are also common in their cultural tradition and shared stories.

Some scholars maintain that the Kalasha community has incorporated many influences from the nearby pre-Islamic Nuristan in Afghanistan, from a group known as 'red Kafirs', who also went through religious persecution in the late 1890s, were merged into the neighbouring valleys. However, the religious practices and cultures of most tribal communities of the Hindu Kush could be traced down to Indo Iranian and Dardic origin. The people of Kalash community have been trying to maintain their identity through their unique and nonviolent way of life based on their oral traditions and the religious mythologies, (Torwali, 2023).

The Kalasha ethnic identity went through two-pronged traumas in the wake of and after 1895. Firstly, the British East India Company's backed religious fundamentalism was instilled and perpetuated in the Chitral region, following the Chitral expedition, which was a British relief and rescue mission in 1895. The arrival of the British in Chitral led to

the revocation of the independent status of Chitral as an independent state to a partially independent state. Following that, the minorities of the region including the Ismaili and Kalasha went through a distressful period of persecution and mass conversion. Notwithstanding, minorities of the region previously were comparatively safe and used to live in mutual harmony, (Najib, 2019).

The restoration of the British garrison in Chitral in 1895 and the subsequent installation of Mehtar (Ruler/Elder) Shuja Ul Mulk signaled the start of relentless minority subjugation and conversion under British backing. Minority Communities, prominently the Kalasha and Ismaili were subjected to discrimination and on many accounts forced conversion which continued for decades. The years followed a significant decline of the Kalash population, as religious fundamentalism and forceful conversion coupled with religious tabligh (preaching) left most of the minority groups with no option, other than conversion. Notwithstanding, the support for the Mehtar's Chitral oppressive actions against the minorities i.e. was well backed by the British, which made the condition of the community and other minority groups extremely vulnerable.

On the Other side of the border in Nuristan, Afghanistan, the situation drastically altered with the emergence of the Afghan king Emir Abdul Rahman's army into the valleys of today's Nuristan in Afghanistan in the same year, which resulted in the killing and converting of a considerable number of minorities. A significant number of the 'Kafirs' (minorities) in Afghanistan escaped the persecution and took asylum with their brethren 'black kafirs' (present-day Kalasha), in Chitral, (Torwali, 2023). Scholars also believe that the emergence of the name "Kafirstan" which means the place of pagans or infidels, emerged during the rule of British Protégé, Mehtar Shuja Ul Mulk's oppressive rule towards the minorities of the region.

In the later decades, Pakistan started moving more quickly towards the fervor of religious extremism and terrorism following the Jihadist spell after the Soviet Union invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. As a result, minority communities in Chitral, notably the ancient Kalasha community came under the hovering clouds of oppression and conversion, which continues till date. U.S. troops pulling out from Nuristan, the mountainous province of Afghanistan in 2009 made the community even more vulnerable to terrorist attacks and cross-border skirmishes. In July 2016, Afghan-based militants, reportedly Taliban, attacked Kalasha shepherds in Bumburet Valley, in which the Taliban slaughtered two shepherds and steered almost around 300 sheep across the border to Nuristan, (Baloch S, 2018).

In addition, at present, the community is also intermingled with the complexities of modernization and globalization. Internet services, coupled with the projection of the hateful and baseless narratives about the community on social media are further adding to the social exclusion and discrimination of the kalasha which have gained a significant pace. Subsequently, technological advancement is emerging as a threat to their traditional culture and indigenous norms, as they are caught between their traditional and changing ways of life (Mohyuddin A, 2014).

The exclusive identity projection from Sunni clerical groups has played a significant role in the identity alteration of the Kalasha people. A study by Hussain and Ullah (2019)

highlighted that the increasing influence and encroachment of Sunni religious groups in the valleys has led to the acuity that the Kalasha identity is inferior and incompatible with the dominant Islamic faith of the region. This perception has resulted in the growing trend of social exclusion and discrimination against the indigenous community, which is one of the main factors behind the conversion of Kalasha into Islam and intermarriage with Sunni Muslims. Several studies have also emphasized the impact of conversion and intermarriage on the erosion of their cultural practices and religious beliefs (Bashir, 2017; Schlebusch & Heffelfinger, 2018). The cumulative number of Kalasha individuals converting to Islam and marrying outside their community has led to the erosion of their distinct identity.

Additionally, the educational system in the region also contributes to the decline of Kalasha's indigenous identity. For example, the academic curriculum followed in the schools of the three valleys predominantly promotes Islamic teachings, directly neglecting and overriding the inclusion of their culture, language, and history. The lack of representation consequently, in the education system is resulting in the limited knowledge and appreciation of the indigenous traditions among younger Kalasha generation, which is becoming a source of identity crisis among them. I.e. the increase of inferiority complex among the members of the community.

A report revealed by the National Commission for Human Rights in 2017 made some deplorable disclosures about the threats of systematic violence against the Kalasha community. For instance, the report addressed how the teaching of only Islamic studies, purposely overshadowing their own culture, religious history, and tradition, is making it hard for them to know about themselves and preserve their identity with pride. The chairman (NCHR) Justice (Ret) Ali Nawaz Chowhan, similarly warned the concerned authorities that the indigenous Community is undergoing a serious spell of extinction and there is a dire need to take action to save the community from this incantation of subordination.

Furthermore, the growth of tourism in Chitral in the past few decades has brought noticeable economic opportunities for the Kalasha community, but it has significantly led to the commodification and commercialization of their culture, at the stir of their privacy as well. Scholars (Jan & Yousuf, 2020; Saeed et al., 2019) argue that the influx of tourists has encouraged the transformation of traditional practices into performances solely for entertainment purposes. Most of the time tourists are reported to break into the people houses without giving regard to their privacy. This shift not only undermines the authentic essence of their culture but also reinforces the perception that their identity is primarily based on tourism and commercialization.

### Research Questions

- Does the Identity Subordination Theory explain the Decline of Kalasha Indigenous Identity in Chitral?
- How and in what ways exclusive religious identity projection is being carried out against the Kalasha community in Chitral?

## Problem Statement

Political and religious discourses on minority recognition in Pakistan remain to be a polarized theme. Despite having global prominence and recognition, the Indigenous cultural and ideological identity of the Kalasha community has been witnessing a consistent decline, leaving their distinctive ideological and cultural identity at the peril of apparent extinction. Kalasha's ideological identity and normative values are significant in the surge of an all-out abolition, in the wake of exclusive identity formation from the dominant state-led (Sunni) clerical class.

## Research Gap

The existing literature on the identity projection of the Kalasha community is largely limited to coercive means. Similarly, previous literature on the issue has primarily covered the population decline aspect of the community. This paper is set to unveil and explain the underlying driver/motives behind the gradual perishing of indigenous Kalasha Identity, in light of religious (Islamic) grounds and will address how that exclusive identity projection is carried out in more intricate and incentivized ways.

## Conceptual Framework

### Exclusive Identity Formation

- Identity Subordination
- Incentivized Conversion
- Inclusive Identity Formation

## 3. METHODOLOGY

Considering the availability of limited literature, descriptive-analytical research is projected to view and understand the phenomenon from the Identity Subordination theoretical lens and to predict the present course of exclusive identity formation in Chitral. Similarly, descriptive-analytical research and unstructured interviews would help to uncover the apparent causal relationship between the Kalasha community's indigenous ideological identity decline and the existing incentivized exclusive identity projection from the dominant religious class in the region. There is a great need for understanding the underlying incentivized tactics, as a cause of the consistent decline of the community identity and normative values, being one of the minority classes in Pakistan, and subsequently to predict the probable future of other minorities in the country and descriptive-analytical research would be instrumental.

**Descriptive Analytical Research:** Descriptive analytical research is generally taken as the primary research method, through which a systematic scrutiny and description of the phenomenon under investigation could be attained with the provision of underlying analysis into its nature and forms (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This would enable me to explore the underlying factors and causes (independent variables) in more depth. Unstructured interviews were conducted in the valleys to gather the insights of the Kalasha people as a source of qualitative data for the research. Through these interviews, I intend to unveil and uncover the ostensible

causal relationship between the decline of the Kalasha community's (subordinate class) indigenous ideological identity and the incentivized exclusive identity projection by the dominant religious class in the region, (Patton, 2015). As outlined earlier the research study will be framed within the identity subordination theoretical lens. This would help me to understand and explain how the mainstream dominant (religious groups) are persuading and subduing the identities of the subordinate Kalasha community.

## 4. RESULTS & FINDINGS

### Incentivized Religious conversion of the Kalasha

It is important to note that not all social, cultural, political, or religious identity conversions are forced or coerced, in the case of the Kalasha community, there have been numerous instances where subordination and incentives have been employed to target their religious beliefs and cultural practices. In the context of them, the phenomenon is influenced by various socio-political factors, most prominently through economic incentives, social isolation, and religious fundamentalism, carried out by mainstream religious groups.

#### Economic Incentives

The Kalasha people have been facing significant economic challenges for numerous reasons, which leaves them in a vulnerable state for conversion into a mainstream Islamic identity. One of the main factors causative to the poor economic condition of the Kalasha people is their geographical isolation from the main metropolis. The valleys are located in a rugged and mountainous region, which makes transportation and communication difficult. Limited access to markets and infrastructure inhibits their ability to engage in trade and economic activities, with each other. For instance, the isolated geographical location of those valleys limits their access to markets and trade opportunities, impeding their economic growth (Ahmed, 2016). Additionally, the community relies heavily on subsistence agriculture, which oftentimes get affected by harsh weather conditions and unexpected rainfall, (Shams, 2018). The agrarian-based livelihood of the community most of the time goes through the challenges of soil erosion, inadequate irrigation systems, and the absence of modern farming techniques (Iqbal, 2020).

In addition, the traditional occupations of the Kalasha people, such as subsistence agriculture and animal husbandry, are not highly profitable. Subsequently, their reliance on the selling of seasonal fruits and dry fruits is also not sustainable. They depend heavily on farming practices and the rearing of goats and sheep, which are not significantly profitable. Similarly, the small landholding size and the harsh climatic conditions of the Chitral region limit agricultural productivity and economic growth. They also face challenges due to their small population size. According to some estimates, there are approximately 4,000 to 6,000 Kalasha individuals. The limited population hampers their ability to generate economies of scale and access resources and services available to larger communities.

The deprived economic condition of the Kalasha people is further intensified by the lack of basic infrastructure and services in the valleys. According to a study by Ahmed (2016), the Kalasha valleys suffer from inadequate road networks, unreliable electricity supply, limited healthcare

facilities, and insufficient educational institutions. These issues greatly hinder the development of entrepreneurial activities within the valleys and limit the scope of income generation for the community. Subsequently, the absence of proper tourist infrastructure and services, such as accommodations and transportation, confines the potential economic gains (Shams, 2018). Additionally, they face defies in preserving their traditional way of life and practices while engaging in tourism activities, leading to the preeminence of fights between economic opportunities and cultural preservation (Iqbal, 2020).

According to Biddulph (2019), economic disparities, inadequate resource distribution, and limited livelihood options contribute to the vulnerability of the Kalasha community. Thus the poor economic conditions of the people play a significant role in incentivized religious conversion. These deficiencies discussed, significantly hinder them from keeping up with their indigenous identity, when lucrative incentives are being offered to them from the dominant religious class. Subsequently, Poverty and lack of access to basic amenities make them vulnerable to take up the offers of financial support and economic opportunities in exchange for conversion, which continues at present.

### **Social Isolation**

The Kalasha community, mostly branded for their unique identity, traditions, and religious practices, has long been secluded from the mainstream society. This isolation oftentimes limits opportunities for interaction, economic development, and productive exposure to external opportunities for the community members. Subsequently, the social isolation of the community members significantly affects their indigenous cultural and religious mythologies. Thus, the limited interactions and cultural exchanges, threats to religious practices, and economic marginalization all contribute to the decline of their heritage. Furthermore, the Kalasha valleys (Bumburet, Birir, and Rumbur) are geographically isolated from the surrounding areas. These valleys are located in the Hindu Kush mountain range, making them difficult to access and get connected with neighboring communities, in person. The geographical seclusion, combined with the people's traditional lifestyle and distinct religious beliefs, opposite to the identity of mainstream Islamic identity, considerably contributes to their social isolation.

It is worth mentioning, that social isolation severely restricts the opportunities for the Kalasha people to engage in interactions and cultural exchanges with the members of outside faith. The lack of regular contact with individuals from different backgrounds inhibits the transmission of cultural practices and traditions, leading to the buildup of misunderstanding and despise (Tariq et al., 2018). As a result, the younger generation is less exposed to their ancestral customs and more susceptible to external influences that may leave them an opportunity for conversion, which again adds to the erosion of their unique cultural identity and heritage. Similarly, the social isolation further exacerbates the challenges faced by the Kalasha in preserving their cultural identity and religious rituals. The unwelcoming attitude from the neighboring communities, coupled with the limited exposure of them to the outside world makes it difficult for the Kalasha people to seek support for their religious activities, sustain their cultural rituals, and even preserve the essence of their seasonal festivals (Ahmad et al., 2017). The decline of religious

practices further contributes to the erosion of religious identity.

It is important to keep in mind that, when a member of the Kalasha community converts to mainstream Islam, they not only give up on their religious beliefs but also abandon their language and festivals, and in many cases their families and identity forever. Oftentimes the Social fabric around them compels them to convert and ease themselves from the state of otherness. For instance, the conversion of Sayad Gul Kalash is noteworthy, where one of the motivating force behind the conversion was to get rid of the burden of the socially constructed disgrace with which the majority population treats the Kalash people, who are discouraged from participating in many social, educational and political domains. The social isolation and marginalization of the community have further aggravated the vulnerability of the Kalasha indigenous identity. They are offered very rare instances of positive integration with the dominant Sunni Muslim society and have been subjected to stigmatization and discrimination (Akhtar, 2020). The lack of social support networks and interaction with mainstream society increases their proneness to conversion spells carried out by mainstream religious groups.

### **Conversion as a Religious Compulsion**

The Kalasha community has long struggled to maintain its unique cultural and identity essence. However, in recent years, their way of life has come under threat from religious fundamentalism and Tablighi groups. External forces, particularly Sunni mainstream groups, have exploited religious fundamentalism to target the community. Fundamentalist elements within the Sunni majority perceive their religious practices as un-Islamic and, therefore, as an opportunity for conversion usually resort to systematic ways of conversion (Sikand, 2018). To elaborate, clerical groups' with their religious agenda of conversion have great influence in the Kalasha valleys, and their representatives frequently visit the region under the pretext of tourism. Among other economic promises, the Tablighi Jamaat cash on the intrinsic notions of achieving a sense of "elevation", "purity" and "social interaction" for themselves and their faith. These groups capitalize on religious sentiments and propagate an extremist narrative to incite conversions within the indigenous community. This exploitation involves various tactics, prominently offering of land incentives/stipends, and incentivizing marriages.

A 2017 report by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan entitled "A Call to Preserve Kalash Rights and Culture" featured a report where in June 2016, a 14-year-old Kalasha girl's home was attacked by radical Muslims with sticks and rocks. As per some accounts the girl had earlier converted to Islam, after receiving financial incentives. The next day, she went to her parents' home and put on the traditional Kalash dress, which led some Muslims to believe that she had reverted to her previous faith. The situation became so critical that police had to intercede to disperse the hostile crowd. The incident was a clear reminder of the intolerance that exists in the region and also raised questions about the safety of the perturbing state of Kalasha conversion in Chitral. In another instance, In May 2017, an organized effort was made by radical Muslims to stop the Chilim Joshi, spring festival.

### Exploitation through Stipends and Land Incentives

The historical context of religious conversion attempts against the Kalasha community in Chitral reveals the utilization of stipends and land incentives as few of the core strategies for conversion. Scholars and researchers have extensively shed light on the coercive tactics, emphasizing the resilience and determination of the Kalasha people to preserve their traditions. However, it is equally imperative to address the incentivized causes behind the decline of the community members and their indigenous identities. Religious fundamentalist groups and fanatics often target the Kalasha people by offering land incentives to convert or assimilate them into their dominant Islamic culture. These incentives are presented as an opportunity for the members to attain economic affluence and social acceptance. However, they come with hidden agendas that ultimately revolves around the erosion of the Kalasha community indigenous identity and practices. These inducements in the forms of land incentives are not only adding to the decline of their population but also disrupt the social cohesion and harmony of the region (Smith, 2019).

In addition, financial enticements and land incentives are used by the mainstream clerical groups as essential tools for their religious campaign of conversion. Fida (2015) reveals that the lands of kalasha people are often owned or held by Muslim settlers, leaving the community with limited resources and territorial control. Consequently, the allocation of land to those who converted to Islam largely contributes to the disempowerment of the community members and further subordinates them and their traditional ways of life. Another form of exploitation faced by the Kalasha community is the manipulation of stipends by those Muslim clerical groups. Stipends are monetary allowances provided to individuals for various purposes such as education, healthcare, and social welfare. In the case of the Kalasha community, these stipends are often used as tools to exert religious influence and control. Religious groups offer financial support them under the condition that they adopt Islamic practices, attend their religious gatherings, and to even participate in Tabligh activities within their regions. This creates a weighty tradeoff for the, who due to their less privileged economic condition are inclined to take the stipends, which gradually adds to the erosion of their distinct Kalasha identity (Ahmed, 2020).

Research conducted by Khan (2009) highlights how stipends were used as an effective tool for religious conversion for years. Muslim clerics and influential individuals offered financial support to those Kalasha individuals who converts to Islam, intending to weaken the Kalasha cultural identity and erode their traditional religious practices. These scheme are primarily aimed at exploiting the economic dependence and vulnerability of the community, making it increasingly difficult for them to maintain their distinct indigenous identity.

### Conversion through Incentivized Marriages

Incentivize marriages in the context of Kalasha community refers to the practice in which an outsider, primarily Muslim men from neighboring communities, are stimulated to marry Kalasha women. The community's discrete rituals, religious ceremonies, and social customs are intimately tied to their marriage system (Ahmad, 2018). However, incentivized marriages have emerged as a substantial threat to their cultural and identity survival.

One of the primary consequences of incentivized marriages is the conversion of Kalasha women to men with the Muslim faith, which predominantly adds to soft assimilation.

To elaborate, when an individual from another community marries into the Kalasha community, they often bring different cultural norms and practices that gradually replace or overshadow those of the Kalasha people. These marriages are often accompanied by various financial incentives offered to the families of the women, including cash, livestock, and other material benefits. While the immediate reasons for such marriages may vary, they have had a significant impact on the community's social fabric, cultural practices, and religious beliefs. The community's population has already been dwindling, and the consistent spread of incentivized marriages aggravates the issue by potentially reducing the number of individuals in the community while diminishing the cultural connection of the Kalasha heritage (Ahmad, 2018).

In many cases, conversion to Islam is a prerequisite for such marriages, as Muslim men are very unlikely to marry Kalasha women without them adopting to Islamic values and faith. As a result, the Kalasha population has been witnessing a steady decline. Consequently, with each conversion, their unique culture and tradition loses another member, and the indigenous identity of the community declines. Further, due to a diminution of the birth rate within the community, the population is finding it hard to attain substantial growth, to counter absence of outgoing members. Religiously driven incentivized marriages epitomize a particular disturbing form of exploitation upon the Kalasha people in Chitral. Religious fundamentalist groups target Kalasha women and girls for marriage with members of the dominant Islamic culture, also through soft and systematic approaches. These approaches primarily, as a result, serve to assimilate the Kalasha community into the broader Muslim population and weaken their religious and cultural beliefs. These incentivized marriages often involve the use of incentives aimed at the conversion of Kalasha women to Islam, thereby erasing their traditional beliefs and indigenousness (Khan, 2021).

Additionally, the influx of economic means into the families of married women creates disproportions within the community, causing divisions and potentially undermining the social cohesion among the community members. The economic dependence on incentivized marriages has already signaled the perpetuation of a cycle of cultural erosion, as the Kalasha families may witness a growing inclination to encourage their daughters to marry outside the community for financial gain in the future, which would further contribute to the decline of their indigenous identity. Incentivized marriages disrupt the intergenerational transmission of cultural practices and knowledge within the Kalasha community. As converted women join their Muslim husbands household, they often adopt the Islamic cultural and religious practices of their new families, precipitously distancing themselves from their previous Kalasha identity. This process afterward weakens the cultural cohesion and cultural essence, making it increasingly challenging to continue, preserve, and transmit their distinct traditions to future generations.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The Kalasha community, with their rich cultural heritage and unique religious practices, has faced significant challenges that have led to the decline of their indigenous identity which is a complex issue swayed by various socio-economic factors. Identity projection from external forces (Sunni religious groups), economic disparities, social isolation, and exploitation of religious fundamentalism are contributing to the erosion of their cultural and religious identity. Subsequently, the exploitation of religious fundamentalism and Tablighi in the valleys through land incentives, stipends, and incentivize marriages poses a significant threat to their cultural and religious heritage. These tactics are employed to undermine the Kalasha community's distinct identity and impose Islamic norms upon them. The decline of the Kalasha indigenous identity has been further aggravated by the desertion of their culture and language in the educational system. The curriculum predominantly promotes Islamic teachings, neglecting the inclusion of Kalasha culture and history. This lack of representation in the education system has limited the knowledge and appreciation of indigenous traditions among younger generations.

The poor economic conditions of the Kalasha people, exacerbated by their geographical isolation, limited access to markets, and reliance on subsistence agriculture, have made them vulnerable to incentivized conversion. The lack of basic infrastructure and services in their region has further hindered their economic growth and perpetuated their marginalization. Land incentives and stipends have been used as core tactics by the mainstream Muslim clerics to subdue them. The allocation of land to those who convert to Islam and the manipulation of stipends have disrupted the essence of the communal unity and economic stability. Social isolation has played a significant role in the decline of Kalasha's indigenous identity. The limited interactions with outsiders and intermittent cultural exchanges have led to a decline in the transmission of cultural practices and traditions, particularly among the younger generation. The social isolation has also made it difficult for the members to seek support for their religious rituals and cultural festivals.

It is crucial for policymakers, human rights organizations, and the international community to recognize and address these issues to safeguard the rights and indigenous identity of the community. Incentivized religious conversion in Pakistan is a very complex issue that requires a multidimensional approach and effective measures. It is important for the government and local authorities to look for both urgent and sustainable measures. Taking necessary actions to protect minority groups like the Kalasha Community Indigenous cultural identity and to ensure that they are not forced or coerced, ought to be carefully strategized and implemented.

### Recommendations

The Cultural ghetto of the small non-Islamic Kalasha community has become susceptible to resource exploiters, religious radicals, and marriage seekers. The distressing drop in their population post-1895 and after independence could largely be associated with state mistreatment as well. Astoundingly, Indigenous people elsewhere in the world have successfully evoked Art.27 of ICCPR for the protection and re-establishment of communities preexisting rights of

cultural survival, but effective measures from the local and Pakistani state authorities have been missing. Considering their consistent population decline, the Kalasha community needs similar and more sustainable actions and reforms from the state, (Khan T, 2009). The actions can include taking legal actions as a form of urgent reactionary measure, educational, and social measures to look for more sustainable ways of undoing the subordination;

### Legal Measures

The government of Pakistan should enact laws and advise the local authorities of Chitral to take serious actions aimed at prohibiting the use of incentives or coercion in religious conversion. This can be in the form of fines or imprisonment for those found guilty of such practices. Similarly, there is a great need for the establishment of a reporting mechanism that would list down and report the individuals from the Kalasha or other minority groups of the region who have been coerced or incentivized to convert to a different religion. This can include both a hotline and an online platform for people to report such occurrences. The establishment of such a platform from the state authorities can greatly create a deterrence for the subordinator groups, to limit or give up on their identity projection drive. Additionally, it is essential for the government authorities in the Chitral region to take necessary actions against those religious institutions or groups that are involved in exclusive identity projection and incentivize religious conversion, under the pretext of visits or tourism. This can include shutting down their operations and to a greater extent imprisonment.

### Educational Measures

Apart from taking required coercive measures the state authorities and Ministry of Education should invest in educational programs and seminars within the three valleys. Such actions could prove effective in the promotion of educational opportunities for the Kalasha community to learn about their indigenous culture and heritage while powering religious tolerance in the region. This can be attained by setting up schools in the valleys that would center on teaching the Kalasha language and culture. Subsequently, other sustainable measures could involve the provision of educational scholarships for the community students to study at universities in Pakistan and abroad.

On the other hand, the need for organizing training and mutual discourse on peace for religious leaders and imams of the mainstream religions in the region is instrumental in the promotion of peaceful coexistence among people from different sects. Needed actions on a local level to discourage subordination, extremism, violence or discrimination based on religion is also imperative. In the longer context establishment of sustainable curriculums through the principles of inclusion that would be around teaching students and the general commonalities about different identities and religions could greatly solidify the importance of respecting others' beliefs and religious plurality.

Furthermore, on a local level, local authorities and community leaders can provide safe and conducive avenues for the government to launch education and awareness programs on social harmony and inclusion. This could gradually add to the awareness of the general public of Chitral about the importance of the Kalasha community for the recognition tourism industry of the region, in general.

## Social Measures

Given the existing preeminence of negative peace in the region, the government should work with community organizations, foreign NGOs, and community leaders to promote interreligious discourse and mutual harmony. This can be in the form of assisting NGOs that are working on the rights of minorities in the region and also through organizing peace seminars and forums where individuals from different religious backgrounds can come together and discuss their beliefs and showcase their distinct cultures in a safe environment. Additionally, the need for local government authorities to set up and fund cultural centers, museums, and libraries to showcase the Kalasha community's history and customs could attract global attention and funding. Such places could prove effective in the preservation of their cultural artifacts and historical trends/stories and can also add to the revival of their fading indigenous identity pride. Subsequently, those cultural centers can create substantial revenue, which could be spent on the preservation and economic progress of the community.

Consequently, to address the growing trend of fabricated and baseless campaigns against the Kalasha community on social media platforms, urgent actions are needed. It is significant for the government and concerned authorities including the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) to shut down those social media handles and punish the handlers on an urgent basis. Subsequently, there is a need to invest in media campaigns throughout the country, which would promote religious tolerance and discourage hate speech or discrimination based on religious identity. To sum up, addressing the alarming issue of identity projection and incentivized religious conversion in the Kalasha community would entail a more inclusive approach that involves legal, educational, and social measures both at the state and local levels from all the stakeholders. The government should look for both urgent and sustainable actions to undo the subordination stratagems and work with civil society and community leaders to promote religious tolerance and mutual harmony in the region and elsewhere to ensure more inclusive societies, where the identities of the minorities are protected.

## Competing Interests

The author did not declare any competing interest.

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