

By Sabiha Ashraf

Green, brown, blue – their eyes are beautiful, but these eyes can hardly see. A lot of the Kalash are blind or nearly blind.

Eyes to See, Eyes to Heal

AUTUMN is the time to pick walnuts and grapes. Stone age implements coax oil out of some of the walnuts. The rest are stored away for winter. For winter too, is the wine. Home-crushed from the grapes.

Before the white of the winter blots out the warmth of these fruit laden autumn days, is a happy time for all. "Even the little children get drunk."

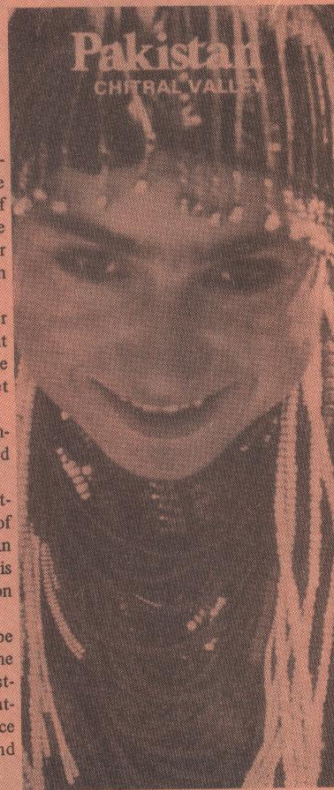
Ancient Greece? Another time, another place? No. The time is now and the place right here, in Pakistan.

The fair-skinned, light-haired, light-eyed people in the Kalash valleys of Chitral may have Greek blood in them but that's conjecture and there is not much authenticated information regarding their origins.

People, however, continue to be fascinated by the Kalash. Over the years, I had heard several people mostly foreigners, talk about the enchanting valleys – seen glimpses of the place through magazines, brochures and films.

Some two decades back my own brother, a movie cameraman had been up there and back with memories of his trip – on celluloid.

And now, years later, scattered on the floor for me to see, were memo-



ries of another trip. These were far more fascinating than anything I had seen earlier. These sketches and paintings were not of the Kalash but done by them. A few of them were of the Kalash

and their surroundings done by Bugi and there were some done by Bugi's non-Kalash friends he had made up there – foreigners and Pakistani. There was a very nicely done sketch of a hotel by a Chitrali working in the registration office in Chitral, but most of the paintings were by Kalash children with one or two done by Kalash adults. I found it strange and thrilling to look through the eyes of Kalash children at their environment in their peculiar fashion. Said Bugi: "These children had never been given paint or paper before. For them it was an exciting experience and I was learning to look at things their way. For instance the landscape that I did of mountains for a child and that done by him were vastly different. I was used to looking at mountains from the ground up. He was used to looking at ranges of mountain tops from the top down – it was like an abstract bird-eye view."

Mohammad Bugi, a young Pakistan commercial artist cum interior decorator cum painter had brought back to Karachi this treasure from the valleys, rolled up in a genuine, Kalash goatskin bag.

As far as I know, he is the first Pakistani painter to have gone up there to bring back, not just his own work,

but something done by the Kalash themselves.

For three flower-fresh fruit laden spring months, from April to August, Bugi had lived with the Kalash not as a gaping spectator but as a sympathetic fellow human being seeking not to question their morals but to understand their mores.

He had come back to Karachi before the start of the light-hearted, merry-making *phool* festival of the Kalash so he couldn't have been high on valley-grown grape wine.

But he was intoxicated. Heady with the beauty of the place and sad because of the plight of the Kalash people. Said Bugi, "They are a beautiful people. Their women have long necks, the most delicate wrists and long tapering fingers. I can't describe to you in words but they are beautiful and they are a truly childlike people. Innocent. They hardly have any crime amongst them. They have such few needs. Some things they have in abundance. Like fruits. Such fruit! It's unbelievable. Other things they lack. Common salt for instance. The salt situation is not that bad now but just a decade back they had to sell one of their women for a bag of salt!"

Once the Kalash were spread over an area which included the Hindu-Kush mountains and valleys and stretched from Nooristan of Afghanistan to Kohistan of Swat and Dir, from the Kabul river valley to Badakshan and Wakhan.

"That is the golden time remembered by the Kalash when there were good kings like Bula Singh or Raja Vaii and Trichmir smiled like a golden god upon the bountiful land." Trichmir, Chitral's highest peak, still towers high but for the Kafirs or the Kalash as they are more popularly known, the days are no longer so golden. Kafiristan is now confined to three valleys, Birir, Bumburet and Rambur. And even in this restricted area they feel bound. So harassed are they by unscrupulous exploiting outsiders that instead of three valleys they are willing to settle for just one valley where



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they can pursue their way of life in peace and privacy free from intrusions of all kinds including attempts to convert them to a faith other than what they believe in.

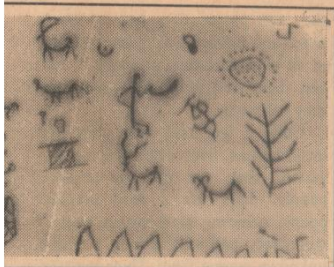
Quite a few have been converted into Muslims. Even without being converted, they are not an immoral people. They are a very peaceful people believing in a certain kind of democracy and brotherhood. Crime is unknown among them. They don't lie, cheat or steal... there are not very many of them; maybe 5,000 in all and they can hardly harm anyone by what they believe in or how they live, yet outsiders keep hounding them so much so that the Kalash are now unwilling to sell their lands to non-Kalash people. They are afraid of the outsiders who are out for their fertile land or their beautiful women."

It's very unlikely that the Kalash will get the valley that they desire — a valley free from prying eyes.

"People marvel at the eyes of the Kalash especially those of women and children. They are beautiful. Green, brown, blue. What people don't realize is that these beautiful eyes can hardly see. A lot of the Kalash are blind or nearly blind. The smoke inside closed dwellings in winter compounded with smoke from wood for cooking in all seasons, plus a total ignorance of hygiene is responsible for their bad eyes. Wherever I went, I met women asking for medicine. Medicine for their eyes or for their children's. It's pathetic."

"Next spring, I plan to go up there again with some doctors who may be willing to spend a few weeks there. I am trying to gather some donations in cash or kind to take some simple medicines to them. These people desperately need medical aid. They need someone to teach them simple rules of basic hygiene..."

The Kalash don't have a written dialect. Bugi had brought back with him a list of Kalash words — "maybe someone can work out a written script for them... If only people were to stop looking at them as if they were animals in a zoo. If only they could



start trying to give them something useful for them. Take designing for instance. The Kalash are potentially good woodcarvers. But they are forgetting whatever skills they had. They have almost stopped making the famous horse and warrior sculpture for their dead. Because that sculpture is stolen away or requested for by some of our Bara Sahibs and the easily frightened Kalash can do little else but comply. Just supposing some of our young designers and artists could go up there and teach the Kalash how to make wooden toys for instance as handicraft items for sale then these people could earn through a craft which is already half theirs.

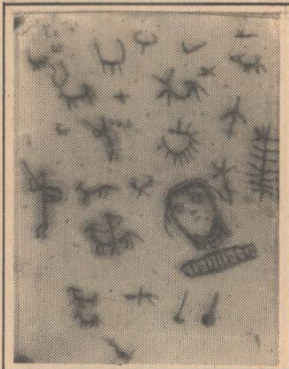
"And it's not that the designers or artists can't learn something from the Kalash in return. For the Kalash have a very individualistic abstract way of seeing things. It's good for artists to go to the very simple. One can learn a lot from the so-called primitives and maybe teach them something in return."

Whether all or any of Bugi's dreams for the Kalash will ever be realised is doubtful. Any individual as disorganized as young artists usually are and as short of funds, can seldom succeed in such aspirations. Those who have the funds and the facilities like PTDC seem to lack what it takes to get things like this done.

More often than not, they end up not being able to do even the least that can be done. As far as Bugi's collector of art work done by the Kalash is concerned, the PTDC should have had the paintings mounted properly and

displayed preferably in a PTDC donated space. Perhaps they could have arranged for a slide show and a short informative talk highlighting the significance of having such an exhibition in Karachi, they could have sent out invitations to get together an initiated audience. But nothing like this happened.

Bugi did try to get the PTDC involved in his first attempt at a display of his Kalash trip work at the PACC.



The PTDC did participate but in what a pathetic way.

PTDC's contributions were a film on the Kalash made by Canadian Television Corporation and a lecture. The film kept stuttering to a stop after

every few minutes because of ruined sprockets. A senior PTDC officer listed on the PACC's programme sheet for the lecture failed to turn up leaving the rostrum to a flustered junior official who read out the talk which sounded almost word for word like one of the PTDC produced brochures and which completely ignored the few paintings that Bugi had been able to display. The pity of it all is that it could have been so much better, so much more meaningful.

Bugi plans another display. This time at the Goethe Institute (29 Sept. to 2nd Oct.)

Hopefully, this time the show will be a better one. PTDC is again participating through the film on one of the days and the Goethe Institute may succeed in repairing the damaged film thus occasioning fewer stops.

Trust the foreign institutes to do a better job of anything which should ideally have been done by our own organizations. Be it the Arts Council or the PTDC or whatever — they never fail to let us down whenever the least bit of a little extra is required.

Maybe someday we will all — including our organizations — have eyes which can really see. Maybe one day we may even be able to heal all the eyes that need healing. Brown, green, blue or black.