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Hidden kingdom

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Despite its struggling economy, progress and hope abound in the ethereal valley of Hunza.

Every morning eight-year-old Asad makes a five-kilometre trek uphill to school from his village home in the suburbs of Karimabad, the capital of the Hunza Valley. His family owns a herd of sheep and a modest plot of land that allows them to store enough meat and grain to last the hostile winter. His father, Gulbaaz, also runs a handicraft shop in the town's main market, selling traditionally embroidered handbags, wallets and cushions made at home by his wife, Shahnaz, and their 15-year-old daughter, Saima. Theirs is just one of the region's famous local handicraft and gemstone shops. Around them gardens brimming with apricots, apples and cherries are irrigated by a traditional water channel system, fed by the melting glaciers during summer and spring water during winter.

Situated at the northernmost tip of Pakistan, bordering China, the Hunza Valley is enclosed by hundreds of famous peaks, including K-2, the world's second highest. It was at the base camp of the Uttar Peak that I met Asad and a bunch of friendly locals grazing their livestock in the remote pastures around Karimabad, a small town of just over 8,000. Historians say the people of Hunza, with their unusually light-coloured hair and eyes, are direct descendents of Macedonian soldiers from the army of Alexander the Great.

The royal family of Hunza (familiarly known as the Mirs) ruled the region from the 11th century, holding complete sovereignty until Pakistan's independence in 1947, when Hunza was given the status of a semi-autonomous princely state within the country. Reforms in the 1970s later abrogated the royal status of the ruling family and gave Islamabad formal charge of the territory. In the 1980s, a joint Pakistan-China project redeveloped an ancient route that had been used for thousands of years by invading armies and Chinese traders, a part of the Silk Road that was carved through the commercial hubs of the Indian subcontinent. The result: the 1,400-kilometre Karakoram Highway (KKH) linking the Pakistani city of Abbotabad

to Kashgar in Xinjiang, China.

Many locals call it the “eighth wonder of the world” as they regard its construction – given the extremely hostile terrain – to be an engineering and logistical marvel. Wonder or not, the KKH certainly revolutionised the Hunza Valley. By ushering in an era of development based on improved connectivity, the highway created immense economic opportunities for the local inhabitants.

Then came 9/11.

The 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States and the subsequent war in Afghanistan dealt a devastating blow to Pakistan’s global image. Tourism in the Hunza Valley, as a result, has pretty much been destroyed.

As hotel and restaurant owners continue to rack up losses, private-sector investment has almost come to a standstill in the last five years. And with a spate of fresh terrorist attacks in the country since 2007, the future of tourism in the region appears bleak. Such is the irony of this ethereal valley. Even during the peak of the tourist season earlier this year, the streets of Karimabad were deserted. Mountain guides and porters kept waiting for that phone call from Islamabad announcing the arrival of an expedition; hotel owners kept checking their e-mail inboxes for new bookings; while the friendly children of Hunza kept staring in the direction of their city’s main road, in search of tourist buses, jeeps and backpackers.

One of the evenings, I sat with the locals. Gulbaaz told me that despite the gloomy times, the spirit of the Hunza people was still alive and kicking. In fluent English, he said he was optimistic that the new educated generation would revive the region’s development.

The local literacy rate exceeds 90% – an amazing feat considering the national average is under 40%. A large part of this is due to the works of the

Aga Khan. The people of the Hunza Valley are overwhelmingly Shiite Muslims from the Ismaili sect, and their spiritual leader is Prince Karim Aga Khan. Based out of Paris, the Aga Khan’s estimated wealth amounts to US$1 billion, making him the richest non-land-owning royal in the world.

As their imam, the Aga Khan has actively worked for the development of his followers throughout the world, especially in the areas of health services and education. The Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) is one of the world's biggest private development networks, partnering governments and international organisations across two dozen countries. In Pakistan, the focus has remained on provisions for the residents of the Hunza Valley.

Over the last two decades, AKDN has developed a vast network of high-standard English-medium schools throughout the valley. The flagship project, the Aga Khan Higher Secondary School in Karimabad, was established in 1986 and is the first residential school of its kind, providing hostel facilities to more than 80 girls. Awareness programmes run by AKDN and the government developed in the people of Hunza a strong belief in the benefits of female education. Here, for the first time in Pakistan, gross female enrollment in primary schools exceeds male enrollment.

The opening of schools not only offers free international-quality education, but also stimulates the Hunza economy through the local teacher hiring policy. After completing high school, many graduates enrol in AKDN-operated vocational and professional development centres, which not only provide technical skills but also facilitate employment in the largest cities of Pakistan. Any potential shortage of teachers in Hunza is thus overcome.

In this respect, the valley is a one-of-a-kind example of an underdeveloped spot in a remote part of the world that has overcome a lack of resources to establish a strong education system. This has only been possible through the active support of the locals, who ignore conservative traditions to embrace modern education without any discrimination of gender.

In a country which is at the fault lines of the ideological battle between religious extremism and enlightenment, this remote valley has demonstrated immense rigour by rejecting radical forces in favor of forward-looking moderation.

Each evening just before sunset, the elders of the town gather at the Baltit Fort for their town meeting where they discuss problems and come to consensus-based solutions. This year, they are worried about the virtual death of tourism, yet they end their discussions by expressing unanimous resolve to overcome the odds. From this tiny locale, encircled by peaks that rise beyond seven thousand meters, with the world's largest glacial region outside of the North and South Poles dancing on its edges, the elders firmly believe that “their” Hunza will soon be back to its glory days.

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