

Climate change adds to hardship in Bartang valley

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Byline: Karim-Aly Kassam

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Karim-Aly Kassam is a professor in the faculty of communication and culture at the University of Calgary who normally does research in the Arctic. Currently, he is undertaking human ecological research in mountainous regions of Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

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The Bartang valley in Badakhshan, Tajikistan, is as stunningly beautiful as it is menacing. In fact, most people of Badakhshan have not been to the Bartang valley because it is very difficult to reach. The roads are at best dangerous and often impossible to pass.

Having secured the services of an experienced driver who knew every twist and turn in the road and a Russian jeep from the Mountain Societies Development Support Program (MSDSP), I was ready to begin my first set of interviews in three villages in unique ecological zones. The Russian jeep -- horribly uncomfortable, but it gets the job done -- was second only in significance to an experienced driver.

Bartang is a critical place to undertake research from the point of view of biological diversity, climate change and food security. The last village, Godara, is a prize both in terms of its unique high alpine conditions, which are almost like the Arctic tundra, and the sense of accomplishment of having overcome hardship to reach it.

We left for our first stop, Basit, a small village along the river. Travelling 45 kilometres can take two or three hours, depending upon the road conditions.

We arrived in mid-afternoon at the home of the president of the village organization. His home and size of land for cultivation were humble. Instead of wheat, he grew potatoes and other vegetables for his family.

A group of men ranging in age from early 40s to late 70s gathered to talk to us. Three hours later, at dusk, as we prepared to leave, supper was promptly served. The village president, with modest means but genuine affection, said we must spend the night in his village as the road conditions were poor and we could not reach our next destination. Hungry and tired, we did not argue.

We settled into an evening of discussion and later music to the rubob, flute and drum. They sang and danced. In Sufi style, common to Ismaili Muslims of this region, one of the villagers reminded me that the strumming of the rubob -- which is a marriage between the mandolin and guitar -- is the direct path to the creator.

At 5 a.m., we arose and set out for Godara, the village farthest away in the Bartang valley. Along the way, we met a Swiss veteran of the region who had been involved in sending much-needed food supplies during the Tajik civil war. He had turned back after three days of trying to reach Godara.

Shortly afterward, we encountered a landslide that blocked an already narrow path. To one side was a mountain and to the other side, an angry, fast-moving river.

Our driver said we needed a tractor to clear the path and even then, the unstable sand and rocks could trigger another slide.

As we surveyed the situation, several smaller slides occurred with large boulders narrowly missing our heads.

We found a tractor, but the driver assigned the task of clearing the path came across the river from the nearest village to tell us his tractor lacked oil for its engine. They were awaiting supplies from the government.

Meanwhile, there was another tractor in the village of Basit, where we had spent the night, which had oil but no fuel. As we discussed what to do, an MSDSP truck approached, carrying humanitarian supplies.

The truck driver suggested we could send our jeep back to get the oil from the tractor which had no fuel in the village of Basit. There was, however, a catch. If we sent our Russian jeep back to the village, there would not be sufficient fuel to get us to Godara and return.

The MSDSP truck had sacks of wheat destined for high-altitude villages, including Godara, which is at 5,000 metres above sea level. Weighing my research against humanitarian assistance, the hope of reaching Godara quickly diminished.

I sat by the roadside, trying to keep a brave face, while our driver went to retrieve the engine oil. Some of the people who gathered around offered apricots, and the MSDSP truck driver offered cushions and shade.

By this act, I had unknowingly gained citizenship in the community. I was no longer a foreigner in their land, but one of them. We were told that if we

were stranded, people would take us back, and supplies of fuel might be purchased from other villages along the way.

After four hours of discussing life in the villages, we finally started again and arrived in Godara after several times crossing roads washed out and waist deep in water because of the gushing river.

Surprised to see visitors, the villagers promptly welcomed us with local bread and tea. After interviews and probing questions from villagers about Canada, community members sang accompanied by the rubob, harmonium and drum.

But it is unwise to romanticize poverty. The problems here are real and of global significance.

There is evidence of climatic change in the villages at the lower as well as upper end of the Bartang valley. Villagers are no longer able to predict the weather and therefore plan their agricultural activities. The changes are having a biological impact. Villages in the lower end of the valley can no longer grow certain fruits. Wheat can now be grown at high altitudes, but there is hardly any arable land. Even this remote and high-altitude region is not immune to the fever engulfing Earth.

Without electricity and utilization of hydro power, more trees are being cut down. In the spring, women weed and water the land. They also take animals to pasture high into the mountains. In the summer, women collect fodder for animals and assist in harvesting. In the autumn, women harvest vegetables such as potatoes, thrash the wheat and prepare it for milling, and retrieve the animals from high pastures. In the winter, they care for the animals.

They do all of this while tending to their families' needs.

Yet, MSDSP is working hard to assist villages and many educated people of Badakhshan stay in the region for poor pay so they can serve their communities.

Canadian aid is having a major impact, as communities are becoming self-sufficient.

Work is underway to build an international university of central Asia that will meet the practical needs of mountainous peoples with campuses in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.

Once built, it will also seek to serve the mountainous peoples of Afghanistan and China.

Illustration:\* Photo: A woman works in the Bartang valley.

