

Madaklasht: A Central Asian Cultural Enclave in Chitral

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Abstract: *Madaklasht, a beautiful valley in Chitral Pakistan, popular for its enduring Central Asian socio-cultural heritage, which provides a very distinctive position to it among its surrounding valleys. Its historical, cultural and religious identity is reflected in its traditions, language, rites, rituals, and overall social behavior. This unique and distinctive identity has been carefully preserved despite the influence of modernity, globalization and diverse dominant cultures. Madaklasht has high literacy rate than neighboring valleys, and has produced well-learned individuals and professionals in the field of education, business, engineering, medical and banking who are serving nationally and internationally. However, remoteness of the area, challenges posed by climate change, and the brain drain have created some serious threats to both its cultural continuity and ecological balance. This article analyzes the history of the migration of the tribes, its cultural expressions and also highlights the importance of integrated strategies to protect the cultural heritage.*

Keywords: Nowruz, Sarpataki, Shoshpalaki, Sumanak.

Introduction

Madaklasht valley is a remote mountainous valley in the southeastern part of Lower Chitral popular for its natural beauty and distinctive Central Asian cultural origin and expressions. This beautiful valley is surrounded by snowbound high mountains creating a distinctive geographical position which enable it to preserve its culture. Madaklasht lies around 40 kilometers northeast of Drosh town (Tehsil), an administrative hub in Southern Chitral. It takes almost four to five hours to reach the valley by Jeep due to a rough and bumpy road which was built in 1969. This road passes through many beautiful valleys having diverse ethnic groups and different languages such as Khowar, Palula, Gujari, and Pashto. Madaklasht is a lush green valley surrounded by predominantly pine-covered mountains. A picturesque stream flows through the valley before merging with the Chitral River. Madaklasht is situated at the edge of the Shishi Kuh valley at an elevation about 8000 to 10000 feet above sea level.

Etymologically, the term *Madak* (or *Midāk*) has been associated with several meanings in Persian lexicons. According to the famous Persian dictionary of *Dehkhuda* and other sources, it refers to a stone or mortar used to grind perfumes such as musk and ambergris into a fine

powder. Another meaning of “Midāk” in Persian is an intoxicating mixture, sometimes associated with opium. So, the word carries both a practical meaning (a grinding stone for perfumes) and a second meaning related to intoxication. A local notable, Nazir. S (1974), recounts that before the arrival of Tajik tribes in Madaklasht, this piece of land belonged to a Kalash chief named ‘*Madak*’. He further explains that the term ‘*Lasht*’ originates from Khowar language and denote a ‘plain’ area. Later, the Mehtar acquired the land from ‘*Madak*’ and gave it to the Tajik tribe. A local educationist and researcher, provides a more detailed account of this story.

Historical accounts report that when Katur Sani (ruler) re-conquered Chitral with the support of cannons produced by this Tajik tribe, he offered them permanent settlement opportunities in Chitral in recognition of their support. As a gesture of appreciation and hospitality toward these few families, who were considered his guests and loyal supporters, Katur Sani ordered his men (*Riaya*) and soldiers from Madak (a valley in upper Chitral) to make certain areas cultivable so that they could establish sustainable livelihoods for Tajiks. (S. Azim, personal communication, Dec. 12, 2025)

According to the 2017 census, Madaklasht village had a population of 3,635 across 509 households. A local survey conducted in 2013 by the organization ‘*Sabit Qadam*’ estimated the number to be 3,964, including those temporarily or permanently residing outside the valley. Majority of the population of Madaklasht is Shia Ismaili Muslims which is the second largest branch of Shia interpretation of Islam. Like other parts of Chitral, the community of Madaklasht comprises several ethnic groups, including Qambari, Ashuri, Munji, Qurbani, Mulahi, Dargi, Zebaki, Ustad Baqai, Ghaznavi, and Haidari. All the mentioned tribes trace their genealogical links with different parts of Badakhshan and today’s Tajikistan. Besides the original settlers who shifted earlier, many tribes, families and individuals shifted to Madaklasht later due to various geo-political situations.

Historical Background

There are several accounts, oral traditions and diverse opinions regarding the arrival of this Tajik tribes in Madaklasht. It is generally believed that founding families migrated from various parts of Badakhshan and Tajikistan during 18th century, probably due to socio-political unrest and extreme religious persecution by the local rulers. According to indigenous opinion, these tribes deliberately sought a remote and safe place to practice their faith independently, and that concealed objective slowly and gradually guided them to shift in the remote valley of Madaklasht. One of the most senior educationists Mr. Munir Hussain, asserts that the community’s ancestral roots can be traced to Tajik-Badakhshan. He bases this claim on the close linguistic affinities and cultural congruence observed within the community, which, in his view, align more closely with those of Tajikistan than with Afghan-Badakhshan. (Munir H. personal communication, Nov.19,2025). While most areas of Chitral experienced cultural diffusion over the centuries, Madaklasht remained culturally isolated, interacting minimally with neighboring Khowar and Pashto-speaking populations. Indeed, this isolation encouraged them to preserve their original Central Asian cultural expressions to this day.

In addition to these accounts, there is a remarkable historical event mentioned by many historians and even verified by the local traditions that the first settlers were invited to Chitral

by the local rulers to produce guns and cannons. Nazir S. (1974) narrates that during a battle between Chitral and Yasin (formerly Warshighum), Yasin's forces used guns against Chitral, which was a new form of defense in war. Upon research and consultation, Chitral's rulers came to know that Badakhshani people were skilled in making such weapons. As a result, a group of skilled gun and cannon makers from Badakhshan was invited to Chitral. This story of arrival has been narrated with slight differences by various authors like Azizuddin (2001) and Murtaza (1962). Interestingly, according to some sources like Lorimer (1922), they (Tajik tribe) initially lived in various villages, including Dir, Ayon, Tar, etc. before they shifted to Madaklasht. A Local notable, Qazi Khurshid, believes that they first lived in Shah Dok (Chitral town) and left for Chukiyatan (Dir) when Shah Khairullah (ruler of Yasin) invaded Chitral in the 18th century. Later on, Katur facilitated them to shift to Thorian Deh (Ayon), originally known as *Tazhiyan Deh* or *Tajikan Deh*. This version has also been verified by most of the local informants and notables.

According to the well-known researcher Mr. Arshad Irfan, early sources such as Mirza Siyar's *Shahnama* and other genealogies of Tajik tribes settled in Samarbagh, near the border with Kunar, Afghanistan, indicate that these people migrated to and settled in Madaklasht at the beginning of the nineteenth century. (Irfan. A, personal communication, 15 Oct, 2025). Although exact dates and detailed records of this tribe's arrival and early history are limited, certain historical clues allow for a reasoned analysis. Renowned linguist Akhunzada. F (2023) explains that,

Toward the end of the 18th century, Shah Khairullah's attack on Chitral marked a turning point in the region's political and social dynamics. This clash forced the Katur leadership to seek help from skilled artisans from Badakhshan, specifically craftsmen skilled in making firearms and cannons. Recognizing the strategic importance of such skills, the Katur rulers also moved these skilled Tajik artisans to Dir (Chukiyatan), ensuring Shah Khairullah could not use their expertise. Historical accounts indicate that this effort was carried out by Muhtaram Shah Katur Sani when he was the governor. The Katur dynasty came into power for the second time during 1792–1793, after which this Tajik tribe was settled at 'Tar' Shishi Kuh valley. During their accommodation at Tar, the community explored Madaklasht valley and considered most suitable place for the permanent settlement. They requested the ruler of Chitral for the permission to move, which was granted. As a result, this tribe finally shifted to Madaklasht in the early 19th century and laid the foundation of a distinctive cultural and linguistic enclave in the mountains of Chitral. (p.162-64)

By critically analyzing the available historical documents and oral traditions, it may be inferred that the founding tribe was invited by the ruler of Chitral to strengthen the state's defense system. Upon their arrival, they initially settled in Chitral Town (Shah Dok). Following the invasion of Chitral by Shah Khairullah (Yasin), they accompanied the ruler into exile in Dir. After the restoration of Katur rule in Chitral, the tribe returned to Chitral and first settled in Ayon, subsequently moved to Tar, and eventually established themselves in Madaklasht, where they permanently settled.

Cultural Practices

Madaklasht is considered a very vibrant expressions of Central Asian cultural heritage which has been maintained through its unique traditions and socio-cultural practices. Its cultural expressions and practices like language, belief system, rites of passages, festivals, rituals, and other socio-cultural traits are deeply influenced by Badakhshan's traditions. In 1992, a team from Tajikistan visited Madaklasht which was facilitated by the Aga Khan Rural Support Program (AKRSP). The said visiting team conducted researches on various cultural and religious practices particularly Chiragh-i Rawshan which is one of the famous religious practices in Central Asia. they also shared Tajikistan's existing practices with the local people of Madaklasht and interestingly there were quite similarities between them. (Qazi. K, personal communication, Nov. 17, 2025). Some of the key cultural elements of Madaklasht are as follow.

Language

The language spoken in Madaklasht is locally called '*Madaklashtchi-var*,' a dialect of the Persian Language, as mentioned by Decker (1992). According to many writers, after arriving in this region, Persian underwent influence from local languages and evolved into a new dialect. Although the language of Madaklasht shows slight influences from major languages like Khowar (language of Chitral), Pashto, Urdu and English nonetheless, it is encouraging that the people of Madaklasht have well preserved their linguistic heritage. Unlike several other languages of Chitral, such as Yidgha and Kalasha, the Madaklashtchi-var has not yet reached a critically endangered situation and continues to be actively used within the community. Khowar speakers historically consider Madaklashtchi-var as "*Dari*" while famous writers like Biddulph (1881) and Murtaza (1962) called the people of Madaklasht as Badakhshi and the language is referred as Persian. Most of the people of Madaklasht understand and speak Khowar, which is the regional lingua franca in Chitral and Ghizer, Gilgit. Despite frequent interactions with different people who speak different languages, one of the major reasons of the preservation of their language is the valley's isolated geographical position. This isolated location helps endogamous marriages among the community which directly played positive role in preserving the culture and language. As far as literary efforts are concerned, '*Madaklashtchi-var* is being written using both Urdu, English and Persian scripts by the new generation. Various organizations like Hunarmandan are active to preserve the language through seminars, conferences, awareness sessions and introducing some modern educational methodologies.

Traditional Attire:

People of Madaklasht like other Central Asian people uses traditional dresses, particularly the elderly segment reflects a unique Badakhshani patterns, connecting the community's enduring cultural relations to Central Asian traditions. Historically, the men of Madaklasht frequently wore long coat (*chapan*) and Central Asian-style caps, which not only provide warmth and protection in harsh weather but also considered as a sign of dignity, respect, and decent cultural expression. (Ajeeb. S, personal communication, Nov.16, 2025). In Madaklasht women's attire are typically featured bright in color, sophisticatedly embroidered clothes paired with shawl, reflecting both modesty and aesthetic expression. With the passage of time the embroidery patterns evolve and incorporation floral and geometric motifs reminiscent of Central Asian's artistic traditions can also be seen. During festivals such as Eid celebrations, Nowruz, weddings, and other happy occasions, beautiful garments are worn with feelings of pride,

which express the community's deep-rooted Central Asian cultural identity. In addition, we can also see the impact of globalization on the youth of Madaklasht who increasingly prefer modern clothing like paint, shirt etc. which are more convenient, widely available and globally accepted.

Music and Dance:

Traditional Central Asian music, featuring tools such as the *dambura* (long-necked lute), *rubab* (traditional lute), *daf* (traditional frame drum), *girjek* (traditional bowed instrument), and flute, are the significant part of local festivals and celebrations in Madaklasht which serve as an entertainment as well as a powerful means of preserving cultural heritage. These melodic tunes and unique music, mostly accompanied by beautiful poetic Persian verses in local dialects, which promote the concept of love, nature, peace and communal harmony. Tajiki folk songs and beautiful dances are performed on special occasions such as Nowruz, weddings and other festivals. Their performances can be characterized by graceful hand movements, rhythmic footwork, and expressive gestures that narrate stories or celebrate life's joys. In the isolated and remote valley of Madaklasht, these various performances in terms of music, songs and dance are not merely artistic expressions but rather a harmonious social get-together which strengthen inter-generational bonds, provide a sense of belonging and reinforce the village's cultural relations to the broader Persianate world.

Poetry and Oral Traditions:

People of Madaklasht have deep connections with Persian Sufi Poets like Rudaki, Nasir Khusraw, Sadi, Firdosi, Hafiz, Rumi, and Shams etc. and recite their verses on different occasions and gatherings. This is a beautiful expression of the local culture which reflect the community's profound literary relation and spiritual orientation. These religious and cultural poetic gatherings mostly take place during winter seasons, particularly during festivals celebrations, where notables, poets, elders and scholars share their poetries and views. One of the local poets Syed Nawaz Tanha articulate his views in this way.

چمن دل خاک و باد ویرانه و برباد

برگل چنندگی غیر تو چه زندگی

The garden of the heart is dust and wind, ruined and laid waste;
Every flower has been plucked away. Without You, what is life?

نه در کار مزه نه در کاروباد مزه

نه مزه در بندگی غیر تو چه زندگی

There is no delight in work, nor any pleasure in prosperity;
There is no joy even in worship. Without You, what is life?

The unique tradition of storytelling of Central Asia is still alive in Madaklasht and passed down through generations as an art carefully infused with spiritual symbols and allegories, moral educations, and cultural narratives. Many of these cultural and religious stories have wonderful messages regarding the reformation of the society, Islamic ethics, unity among humanity and beyond all dignity of human being. The positive impact of these significant traditions is clearly

visible in the behavior of people of Madaklasht who are very pluralistic in nature and constructive in their approaches.

Chiragh-i Rawshan

Like other Central Asian Ismaili Muslims, the people of Madaklasht also observe the tradition of Chiragh-i Rawshan (lamp lighting) which holds a very special position in the community's spiritual and cultural life. This beautiful tradition is rooted in centuries-old Central Asian Ismaili history, and considered as an expression of blessings, spiritual growth, gratitude, devotion, and unity. The philosophy of Chiragh-i Rawshan symbolizes the triumph of light over darkness but also serves as a guideline to seek blessings for wellbeing, prosperity, good health, and more importantly spiritual enlightenment. This ritual is often conducted with huge gatherings where Quranic verses, saying of Prophets (peace be upon him), Persian and Arabic prayers, poetry of Sufis are recited. It expresses the community's profound cultural and religious attachment to their faith, cultural heritage within the broader Persianate world.

Nowruz

The Iranian and Central Asian festival of Nowruz is also celebrated in Madaklasht with a devotion, highlighting the community's historical connections to Central Asian. Mr. Sher Azim articulates his views regarding the celebration of Nowruz in Madaklasht,

Nowruz in Madaklasht is celebrated over three days (19–21, March) with profound spiritual and cultural importance. On 19th March, after the morning prayer at the Jamatkhana (prayer hall), elders of the village use to gather at the Qazi's house to select the Sarpataki (representative). Sarpataki is the symbolic leader who ceremonially initiates important seasonal and cultural activities during the new year. On 20th March, families clean and decorate their traditional houses, create patterns on the roof using flour made from black peas, prepare a special food called Sumanak (Shoshpalaki in Khovar), and bring fresh green branches of willow or pine. (Azim. S, personal communication, Dec. 12, 2025).

On 21st March, people gather again at the Jamatkhana for prayers, then the selected Sarpataki leads each family into their house and places a green branch on the *Sutoon-e-Sheroot* (main pillar) of the house, symbolically opening the house for the new year. Families then visit relatives and neighbors, serve traditional foods, and celebrate with local games and sports, reflecting community's unity, gratitude, and respect for tradition. According to local leaders Mr. Munir Hussain and Mr. Ghulam Haider, the way of celebration of Nowruz in Madaklasht is very similar to that in Tajikistan, and even the nomenclature of cultural elements is similar. In the days leading up to the festival, households begin cleaning and decorating their homes, symbolizing a fresh start and new beginnings. On the day of the festival, families prepare new clothes, special dishes, exchange greetings, and visit relatives and neighbors. Huge gatherings are conducted, and scholars talk about the festival's history, blessings and significance of communal harmony. Elders and notables tell stories about Nowruz's historical, cultural and religious significance helping the youth to understand and continue the significant cultural legacy.

Contemporary Development

It is obvious that the valley of Madaklasht has highly benefited from the socio-economic developmental initiatives by Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN). The valley possess high literacy rates, particularly among youth and women, due to the support of community-based schools functioning under the Aga Khan Education Service, Pakistan (AKESP). It is encouraging that Madaklasht records a higher literacy rate compared to its neighboring areas, with 43% of the population having attained matriculation or higher education, including 34% of women. Several residents have earned doctoral degrees, and many are employed as doctors, engineers, and bankers. Many women from the valley serve as nurses and are working both within Pakistan and abroad.

In addition, the government has also played an important role in expanding educational opportunities. The first primary school for boys, established in 1949 by Amir Khan (a well-known Local Leader), has now been upgraded to a higher secondary school, thereby enhancing access to quality education. (Jahan. S, personal communication, Nov.15, 2025). Beyond education, government institutions, AKDN, and other NGOs have spearheaded a range of socio-economic initiatives through their special programs. They have worked on various fields like strengthening civil society, infrastructure development, hydropower generation, vocational trainings, women's empowerment programs, health awareness sessions, expanding access to medical facilities, tourism, addressing climate change awareness, water supply management, and emergency preparedness. Besides these, many community organizations have been playing a significant role in educating the Jamat regarding various social and cultural aspects of life.

Government institutions remarkably contributed to the promotion of winter tourism. Each year, thousands of tourists visit Madaklasht for the annual Snow Festival, skiing, which is locally known as '*Darjak*'. This not only fosters youth engagement but also stimulates the local economy by providing income-generating opportunities for entrepreneurs and small businesses in Madaklasht. According to the local newspaper *Chitral Today*, in 2020, the provincial government declared Madaklasht a tourist zone and began purchasing land for hotels and hospitals. It also planned to construct chairlifts from Kumrat (Dir) to Madaklasht to attract tourists; however, these plans have not yet been materialized due unknown reasons, though they reflect the government's interest in promoting tourism in the region.

Conclusion

Madaklasht valley stands as a living repository of Persianate Central Asian culture, transplanted into the heart of the Hindu Kush. Its people maintain a distinctive fusion of Central Asian cultural heritage and South Asian geographical influences reflected in their language, traditions, Culture, and diverse religious practices. However, this Central Asian cultural uniqueness now embraces growing challenges. On the one hand, climate change and environmental degradation have threaten the valley's fragile ecosystem, and on the other hand increasing migration for education and employment highly accelerates language-shift and cultural assimilation. Remoteness and weather-induced isolation further reduce access to quality healthcare, emergency services, and diverse socio-economic opportunities.

To protect the rich cultural heritage of Madaklasht, there is a consensus among community members and youth on the urgent need for comprehensive documentation of the Madaklasht's dialect, cultural heritage, oral traditions, and historical narratives so that they easily be preserved and passed to new generation. In addition to cultural preservation, infrastructural

development, all-weather road access and sustainable tourism can definitely ensure economic strength without compromising ecological balance. Strengthening local educational institutions and vocational centers will empower the younger generation to value and carry forward their cultural identity.

In conclusion, Madaklasht's future depends on a balancing two important aspects of development, the heritage preservation and the sustainable socio-economic development. This will help the people of Madaklasht continue to grow educationally and socio-economically while keeping their distinctive cultural identity alive.

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