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The
dying
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Kawai Village/Dr. Shehla Ahmad

Dr. Shehla Ahmad

The road to Kawai



Kunbar river side/Dr. Shehla Ahmad

*Dr. Shehla Ahmad
writes about the mystery
and romance, not of a
destination but of the
way there*

For us city-dwellers sweltering in the torrid Punjab summers, a trip to Pakistan's Northern Areas is always a special treat, especially when your destination is a village by the musical name of Kawai situated 22 km north of Balakot, the mouth of the 155km long Kaghan Valley.



Kunbar Jewels/Dr. Shebla Ahmad

The drive from Islamabad to Abbotabad - usually the first stop on the six hour journey to Kawai from the capital - is uneventful, and too full of honking cars and noisy trucks to write home about. But once you emerge from the crowded town and the traffic, the markets, the buildings melt into the background; the majesty of the Western Himalayas takes over. This is the range which boasts its highest peak, the Nanga Parbat, standing at 8125m. The Western Himalayan range itself includes the Kashmir, Kohistan, Kaghan, and Deosai regions.



Double Rainbow in Kawai/Dr. Shebla Ahmad

Twisting and turning through the main Kaghan road, still under reconstruction after the 2005 earthquake, as we pass the town of Garhi Habibullah, a deep, rumbling sound like rolling thunder can be heard in the distance. The Kunhar River, source of the ubiquitous sound, suddenly gushes forth. It is now so close to the road that its volatile presence cannot be ignored. It demands immediate attention, enticing us with its frenzied, turbulent dance, so that a brief stop becomes imperative. Here, more than 50 km away from its pristine origins, the glacier melts of the Malika Parbat and Makra peaks and lake Saiful Mulook, it is a frothy coffee colour from the mud accrued over its course coming down from Balakot. On either side, heaps of colourful stones, glistening brilliantly like jewels, pay rich homage to their king, the Kunhar.

The Kunhar riverside is a popular picnic spot for travelers and tourist families, where, sitting on *charpays* with the icy water bubbling and foaming at their bare feet, they savour the local culinary delight - crispy fried river trout, complete with head, eyes, and the entire intact body. Dig delicately into the flesh though, because it is full of fine fish bones! The cold river water serves as natural refrigeration for the soft drinks; for tea lovers, hot sweet tea is plentiful.

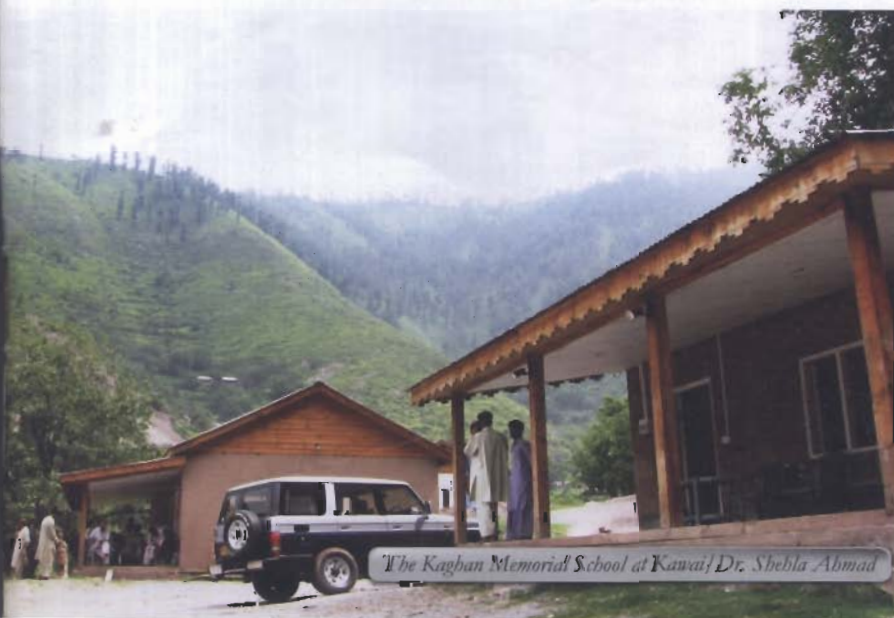


The Kunhar and us/Dr. Shebla Ahmad

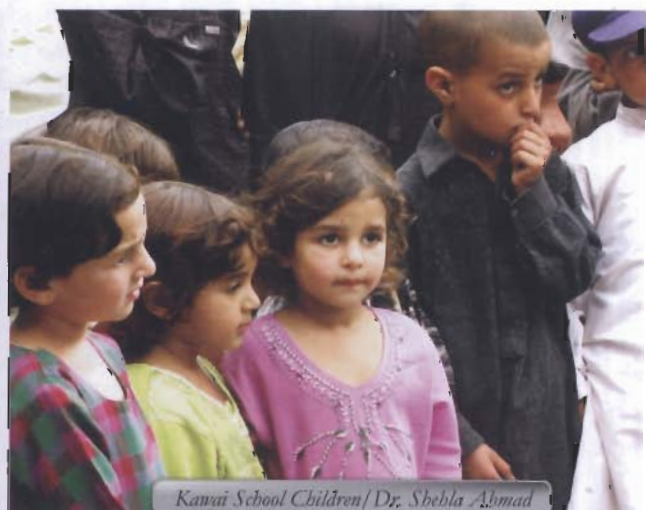
Crossing over the river at Balakot bridge, the Kunhar moves to the left side of the now bumpy road. Balakot seems to be a haphazard jumble of blue and white structures, the makeshift houses built with earthquake-proof materials that comprise the newly rebuilt city. Huge bare muddy areas on the slopes mark the place where the mountains collapsed during the earthquake. The area, though throbbing with human activity, has an austere look to it and, thankfully, whizzes quickly by.

On the eastern side of the valley, the feel suddenly changes; fir and spruce replace the Himalayan pines, and the rarified air acts as a mood elevator. The lofty mountains narrow down on us, overwhelmingly grand. As we climb steadily up from the 914 metres at Balakot, the river takes a back seat and fades to a silvery ribbon deep down in the valley. Our journey's end, still about 22 km away, needs a steep ascent of some 305 metres.

The road, curving more sharply now, is metalled in some places and broken and potholed in others. Further ahead, it seems threadlike, like a whitish cord wound midway around massive green mounds, doggedly ascending the heights as if on a fervent quest. At one such turn we come face to face with very slow moving traffic - a herd of mountain goats nonchalantly navigating its way through our motorcade. With a goatherd and two dogs in tow, they pass by in no haste, seeming to belong to a leisurely past now long lost to us.



The Kaghan Memorial School at Kawai/Dr. Shebla Ahmad



Kawai School Children/Dr. Shebla Ahmad

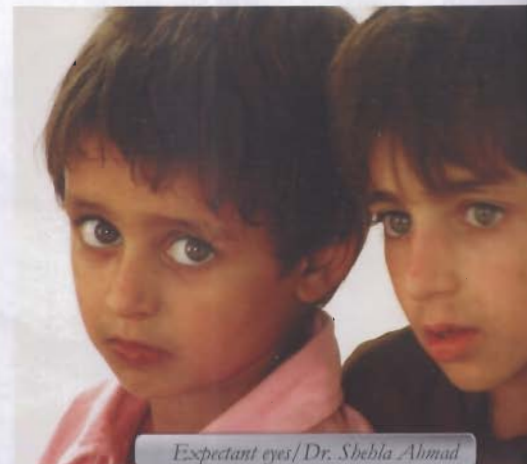


Beautiful Pines/Dr. Shehla Ahmad

A light rain shower makes the air cleaner and the colours crisper. As the late afternoon sun peeps through froned clouds, we behold a breathtaking view – a double rainbow materializing right before our eyes, arching perfectly over the two tallest peaks in the valley. Not one, but two pots of gold in store! We like to believe this to be a sign, good tidings for all of us!

Our destination now in sight, our excitement is insuppressible. Nestled deep in the lap of the lushest mountains in the world, with tiny white houses clinging precariously to the steep slopes, Kawai welcomes us. Agricultural terraces interspersed with walnut trees, thick forests of sweet smelling fir and spruce, mountaintops veiled in wispy clouds, multitudinous wild flowers bobbing their heads in the cool breeze: Kawai looks like a piece of paradise.

Our jeep swerves up the dirt path leading to the Kaghan Memorial School, a private school being built by the Kaghan Memorial Trust in memory of the thousands of children who perished in the Kaghan valley in the 2005 earthquake. The sweetest vision of Kawai though, is yet to be seen: it is the sea of young faces, brown-eyed, green-eyed, black-eyed, expectantly awaiting our arrival. These innocent children and their parents, affected one way or the other by the terrible earthquake, seem to forget what they have suffered in the hope of the future, promised to them by this school. The everlasting mountains stand witness to the death, and to the promise. A new day has begun.



Expectant eyes/Dr. Shehla Ahmad