

Bagrot valley today - experiences and impressions when visiting 2008

The 25 km long Bagrot valley has about 9000 inhabitants today - in 1990 there were 6500. The habitat extends to six villages and the associated summer settlements and alpine pastures at an altitude of 1700 - 3300 meters in the Karakoram -Mountains of northern Pakistan. Agriculture is their economic basis. An increasing number of families now have an income from the seasonal sale of agricultural products outside, such as potatoes, apricots, nuts and tomatoes, and the gainful employment of a family member, mostly in the army. The majority of the population is young due to the wealth of children in many families.

The families speak Shina, the mother tongue in Bagrot and other areas of the northern region. The common language in Pakistan is Urdu. Children learn Urdu as a first foreign language in schools. The girls only started in the 1990s when the first girls' schools opened.

The valley's population is committed to the Shiite community. The majority of Pakistan's population are Sunnis.

The only access road to the Bagrot Valley is an unpaved narrow jeep slope, like the first time I visited it in 1989, in poor condition for long stretches. For cars it is not passable in places. The mostly overloaded and decrepit passenger and transport jeeps rock back and forth dangerously in the tight bends on the slope - every journey is an adventure that you would like to do without.

Water

The supply of electricity to households by a small hydroelectric power station is also very inadequate and often interrupted for hours. It is enough for some light bulbs, hardly for electrical devices such as stoves, radiant heaters and the simplest washing machines. Wood continues to be the main fuel.

Four out of six villages now have access to relatively clean water through the construction of water pipes fed from springs. The agricultural land is irrigated from an open canal system that runs through all fields, meadows, gardens and villages. The canals are fed by meltwater from the surrounding mountains and glaciers. Regular watering is vital, as this is the only way to make the soil fertile.

Bagrot mobile

Mobile phones find their way into bagrot. Second-hand devices are inexpensive and the mobile tariffs are low. In view of this offer, the conventional government telecommunications network will not be expanded. In the narrow and steep valley, in the middle of the stone deserts, you can sometimes find a place that, with skillful handling, offers network reception. The mobile phones are mainly used outside the valley. But those who can at least read numbers appreciate the opportunity to stay in touch with relatives and friends in this way.

Between Bagrot and the central city of the region, Gilgit, which is only 17 km away, is the large settlement of Danyore on the Karakorum Highway. Over the past few years, due to its infrastructure and convenient location, it has developed into a new center for many Bagroti. Young economically well-off families today buy small plots of land in Danyore or rent a house, move in with the school-age children and use the wide range of schools and colleges on site and a small university in Gilgit.

The fields and gardens in Bagrot continue to be cultivated to ensure their livelihood. Most of the older family members stay in the valley. The great hike into the valley starts regularly during the summer and winter holidays and on public holidays. Basic foodstuffs such as wheat, vegetables and fruit as well as firewood are brought out of the valley and exchanged if necessary to avoid cash purchases on the market.

Inflationary spiral

The rapid price increases in Pakistan in the course of this year for almost all goods of basic daily needs but also gasoline, cement, wood and other building materials put a strain on the majority of families who are already living on a subsistence level. The average inflation rate is 25%, for food 31%. If you do not possess enough land and gardens to take care of the family yourself and sell excess income, you have to buy everyday food on the local and regional market. Added to this are the increased costs of transportation. In view of these significant cost increases, we have increased teacher salaries significantly. The favorable exchange rate of the euro against the Pakistani rupee partially compensates for this increase, and the regular purchase of school clothes, books, notebooks, pens, etc. and the fees for exams at public colleges are also burden for many household budgets. School fees are still not charged for attending the girls' school.

Daily routine at school

Everyday school attendance for girls is now the norm in most families. We were in Bagrot at the time of the annual exams from late April to mid-May. The written annual exams take place for the 1st-8th Classes take place under the supervision of the teachers in the classrooms or, if the weather is fine, outdoors in the school grounds. The new examination procedures for all 9th and 10th grades, however, involve a lot of effort. External teams of teachers, accompanied by a policeman, bring the centrally standardized exam questions to the examination centers at selected secondary schools and oversee the exams. Unauthorized persons are not allowed to enter the school premises during these hours. So we stayed outside and encouraged the 57 exam candidates from Monika Girls High School on the way. The days between the individual exams are free of lessons and you prepare at home. For the girls, I can say that in addition to all the household chores, they were very busy buffeting late into the night. After each exam, the answers were compared and we saw happy and unhappy faces on the way to school. Some of the older students were picked up by their brothers or husbands, who facing many difficult exam questions were often perplexed.

Monika Schneid

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More information: www.bagrote.net