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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Darel Valley; migration; modernity; mobile phones; material culture; social change; ethnographic fieldwork; Gilgit-Baltistan	I first visited Darel Valley in the Diamer District of Gilgit-Baltistan in 2000 and returned in 2001, 2006, 2009, 2017, 2019 and 2023. During these visits, I noticed considerable differences in everyday life from what I had observed during my earlier fieldwork. Migration, education, greater mobility and the arrival of new communication technologies were among the developments I observed over these years. This paper is based on key informant and semi-structured interviews, participant observation and informal conversations conducted during these visits. Special attention is given to migration to Rawalpindi, Abbottabad and Karachi, the spread of mobile phones and television, attitudes towards weapons and tribal feuds, and changes in material culture, dress, food, music and grooming. Some locally made objects and older customs became less common during my fieldwork. Shaloro, associated with the first snowfall in upper Darel, had largely declined, while <i>Rashi/Nasalo</i> , the preparation and storage of dried meat for winter, continued because of its practical importance during the severe winter months. My field observations show that newer ways of living did not replace older practices at the same pace throughout the valley.
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Introduction

Darel is one of the important valleys in Diamer District, Gilgit-Baltistan (Fig. 1). It is known for its distinctive social organisation, tribal culture and village-based institutions. Tribal leaders have long exercised considerable influence in individual villages, while kinship, customary practices and local institutions have played an important role in regulating social life. The neighbouring Tangir Valley shares several features of this social organisation. Over the past few decades, however, everyday life in Darel has changed noticeably.



Fig. 1. Darel Valley (Photo by the author, 2009).

During my earlier visits in 2000, 2001, 2006 and 2009, and later visits in 2017, 2019 and 2023, I documented the culture, social organisation, history and heritage of Darel Valley. Returning to the valley over more than two decades allowed me to see differences that would have been difficult to recognise during a single period of fieldwork. Some objects and practices I had observed during my earlier visits were rarely seen when I returned years later. Mobile phones, electronic appliances and manufactured goods, meanwhile, had become increasingly common.

Migration was one of the most noticeable influences on everyday life. Darelis travelled to Rawalpindi, Abbottabad, Karachi and other urban centres for employment, livelihood and education, but continued to maintain close links with their home villages. People returning to Darel brought with them objects and technologies as well as tastes and experiences acquired in towns and cities. For younger Darelis, education and time spent outside the valley also meant greater familiarity with urban life.

During my visits, I saw the effects of these experiences in ordinary aspects of village life. Mobile phones became common, household objects changed, and new styles of dress and grooming could be seen, particularly among younger men. I also noticed differences in attitudes toward music and carrying weapons. However, older practices did not disappear in the same way or at the same time. Some became rare during my fieldwork, while others continued because they still served a purpose in pastoral life, the household economy, or the severe winter conditions of Darel.

The main objective of this paper is to study how modernity, migration and mobile communication have influenced social and cultural life in Darel Valley.

Ethnographic Fieldwork and Methods

I began fieldwork in Darel in 2000 and returned to the valley in 2001, 2006, 2009, 2017, 2019, and 2023. My interests during the first visits centred mainly on customary practices and social organisation. As I returned to Darel over the years, I recorded other aspects of village life, including material culture, local institutions, oral traditions, religion, history and heritage. The gaps between these visits also enabled me to compare what I had seen earlier with what I encountered when I returned.

I used key informant interviews, semi-structured interviews, participant observation and informal conversations during the fieldwork. I spoke with village elders, oral historians, local intellectuals and other inhabitants familiar with the customs and social life of Darel. Semi-structured interviews helped me record individual experiences and memories, while informal conversations were particularly valuable when discussing customs and practices that were no longer common.

My field visits covered villages in both lower and upper Darel. I observed everyday social life as well as houses, household objects, dress, food storage and pastoral activities. I also recorded the use of locally made objects, some of which became increasingly difficult to find during my later visits. In contrast, mobile phones, electronic appliances and manufactured goods became much more visible.

The long intervals between some of my visits were particularly useful for this study. They allowed me to compare what people remembered about earlier practices with what I had recorded or observed myself during previous fieldwork. The discussion in this paper therefore draws both on people's accounts and on observations made during successive visits to the valley.

Literature Review

Darel has received attention from historians, archaeologists and ethnographers interested in its history, social organisation and place within the wider Dardic region. Earlier scholarship is particularly valuable for understanding the valley before roads, migration, education and modern communication became as prominent as they were during my later field visits. Historical and archaeological studies also connect Darel with a much longer history of movement across the mountain regions.

Tucci (1977) discussed Darel in his reconstruction of the historical geography of the Dards. Tucci (1977) cited the Dards in classical and other historical sources, described their geographical distribution, and traced their connections with neighbouring regions. His discussion included attempts to identify Darel with Ta-li-lo mentioned by Chinese pilgrims and its possible historical relationship with Uddiyana, or Swat.

Tucci's discussion is mainly historical and archaeological, but it also locates Darel within the routes that linked the mountain valleys with neighbouring regions.

Dani (2001) placed Darel within his broader history of Dardistan and the Northern Areas of Pakistan. His account brought together historical, archaeological, linguistic and ethnographic material on the region. Darel and Tangir figure in this wider history and in the connections that existed between these valleys and surrounding regions.

Jettmar provides a more detailed picture of social life in Darel and Tangir during the mid-twentieth century. During his fieldwork in Dardistan in the 1950s, Jettmar (1961) discussed social organisation, landholding and settlement patterns, including the organisation of patrilineal groups and village quarters at Phuguch in Darel. His account is useful for my study because it describes Darel several decades before I began fieldwork there in 2000. In a later publication, Jettmar (2001) again discussed Darel and Tangir within his account of northern Pakistan and their links with areas beyond these valleys.

The archaeological record points to a much earlier history of settlement in Darel. At Muzot, Khan (1999–2000) documented an Iron Age grave culture site as well as other archaeological remains in the valley. His work records a much earlier phase of human settlement and cultural activity than the ethnographic literature describes.

Tsuchiya's research is especially relevant because she combined textual sources with field investigation in Darel. Between 1998 and 2004, she studied the valley's historical geography and archaeological remains in relation to Chinese accounts of the region (Tsuchiya, 2006). She used her field observations alongside historical sources to reconsider the identification of Darel in early accounts and its position within the surrounding mountain region.

Frembgen's (1999) study of Indus Kohistan concerns a neighbouring mountain area with which Darel and Tangir have had connections through movement and exchange. Darel has its own social and historical background and should not be treated as an extension of Indus Kohistan. Frembgen's ethnographic account remains relevant for understanding the wider regional setting in which these neighbouring mountain communities interacted.

More recent studies from Gilgit-Baltistan have dealt with mobility, modernity and people's growing interaction with places beyond their home valleys. Writing on Hunza, Hussain (2015) questions portrayals of remote mountain communities as socially isolated from wider historical and political developments. Remoteness, in his account, can exist alongside continuing engagement with the outside world. People may encounter new technologies, goods and practices without abandoning all aspects of their earlier social and cultural life. Hunza and Darel have different histories and social settings, but the question is relevant to Darel, where I found older practices continuing alongside new objects and ways of living.

Studies elsewhere in Gilgit-Baltistan also show how migration has connected mountain villages with places outside them. Benz (2016), writing on Gojal, discusses migration and the links people continue to maintain with their home communities. The situation I observed in Darel has some similarities with Benz's observations, as Darelis who left for employment or education continued to keep in touch with their families and villages. Cook and Butz (2018) discuss mobility in Shimshal from the perspective of road access and transport and the ways these affected movement outside

the valley. The circumstances of Gojal, Shimshal and Darel are different, but movement beyond the home valley is a feature found in each of these studies.

Basch et al. (1994) write about migrants who continue to maintain ties with the places from which they moved. Their study deals with migration across national borders, which differs from what I recorded in Darel. Most Darelis I met had moved within Pakistan, particularly to Rawalpindi, Abbottabad and Karachi. I use their work here only as a point of comparison. Darelis living in these cities continued to visit their villages, communicate with their families and bring back goods and experiences from urban life.

Rahim et al. (2020) studied mobile phone use among young people in rural areas of Gilgit-Baltistan. They found that people used phones for communication and education, to obtain information, and for safety and security. Their study comes from a mountain setting where distance and difficult terrain also shape communication. I came across a related problem in Darel before mobile service reached the valley, when people sometimes had to travel outside Darel simply to make a telephone call.

Walter (2021), writing about young women in Gilgit, considers mobile phones through their place in interpersonal relationships. Constant connectivity created opportunities for direct communication but was also connected with questions of intimacy, morality and social expectations. Her study concerns a social setting different from Darel's. However, it highlights something also important in the present study: mobile phones acquire their social significance through the circumstances in which people use them.

My own engagement with Darel began with fieldwork in 2000, followed by visits in 2001, 2006, 2009, 2017, 2019 and 2023. My earlier research on decorated wooden coffins in Darel and Tangir documented a funerary tradition already in decline, particularly the elaborately carved wooden coffins of Darel (Kalhoro, 2008). Later fieldwork drew my attention to other developments in material culture and everyday social life (Kalhoro, 2019). I subsequently documented aspects of the valley's religious, archaeological, and architectural heritage (Kalhoro, 2021).

Earlier scholarship has provided a substantial record of Darel's history, archaeology, and social organisation, while more recent studies from Gilgit-Baltistan have examined migration, mobility, and communication in other mountain communities. What is less well documented is how such developments could be observed within Darel across different periods. My repeated visits offered this opportunity. Objects that I had documented during earlier fieldwork became difficult to find; shepherds no longer always wore the dress I had seen before; attitudes towards weapons and music altered; and television and mobile phones became increasingly familiar. However, older practices did not disappear uniformly. Some faded from everyday life, while others continued because they still had a place in household economy, pastoral life or adaptation to winter conditions.

Ethnographic Findings

Migration and Exposure to Urban Life

During my fieldwork, I met many Darelis who had moved to Rawalpindi, Abbottabad, Karachi and other towns and cities for work, livelihood or education.

Although they lived away from Darel, many continued to visit their villages and remained closely connected with their families. When they returned, they also brought things from the cities where they had been living or working.

I noticed this particularly in people's houses. Electronic appliances and manufactured household items that I had rarely seen during my early visits were more common when I returned in later years. In some houses, family members working in cities had brought these items back with them. The contents of the houses themselves therefore reflected some of the contacts that families had developed with urban life.

Mobile phones also made it easier for Darelis living elsewhere in Pakistan to stay in contact with their families in the valley. During my later visits, I noticed other differences among young men who had studied or worked outside Darel. Some dressed and groomed themselves differently from what I had seen during my early fieldwork, and their interests also reflected their experience of living in towns and cities.

Education and Changing Social Relations

During my early visits to Darel, it was common to see men carrying guns. People carried them for security, particularly where disputes or tribal feuds existed, but a weapon could also signal a man's status. Some disputes between families or groups continued for years, and in such circumstances guns remained a visible part of social life.

On my later visits, I saw fewer men carrying guns. I noticed this especially among younger educated Darelis and those who had studied or worked outside the valley. Local people with whom I spoke also felt that educated youth were generally less inclined to become involved in blood feuds. I would not attribute this to education alone. Employment, migration and greater interaction with people outside Darel had also exposed younger Darelis to different experiences.

Tribal relationships and local institutions still had a place in village life. Younger people, however, had more opportunities to study, work and spend time outside the valley. Their experiences beyond Darel were also reflected in attitudes towards disputes, weapons and expressions of male status.

From Guns to Mobile Phones

Perhaps one of the most striking differences between my earlier and later visits was the mobile phone. During my early fieldwork, radios were used in Darel, but television sets were uncommon and often discouraged. Mobile phones subsequently spread much more widely and became an ordinary part of daily communication.

Before mobile-phone towers were installed in Darel around the end of 2011, making a telephone call could require considerable effort. Darelis sometimes travelled to Shatial simply to call relatives and loved ones or to deal with business and other important matters. After mobile-phone service became available in Darel, people no longer had to travel outside the valley simply to make a call. From 2012, I found that they could contact relatives in other villages as well as family members living in Rawalpindi, Abbottabad, Karachi and other parts of Pakistan.

People also used their phones for practical matters. They made calls for business, travel arrangements, and information exchange. For Darelis living away from the valley, the phone made regular contact with their families and villages much easier.

Another difference caught my attention during the later visits. In the early years of my fieldwork, seeing men carrying guns was common. Years later, I was more likely to see a mobile phone in a man's hand. I do not suggest that one simply replaced the other, since they had entirely different uses. However, the difference between my earlier and later visits was noticeable.

Some young Darelis also used social media to share photographs and videos of the valley, its landscapes, cultural heritage, and everyday life. Others had become active on TikTok and attracted viewers beyond Darel. The phone thus gave them a way of presenting aspects of their valley to people far beyond their own villages.

Media, Religious Authority and Social Change

Television was still uncommon during my earlier visits to Darel. Religious leaders discouraged people from watching it, regarding television as contrary to religious values. I rarely saw television sets in houses then. Later, as Darelis who had lived or worked in cities returned to the valley, some began bringing television sets into their homes.

This did not result in immediate acceptance. I saw attitudes alter over successive visits as television and other electronic devices became more familiar. People who had studied, worked or lived outside Darel already knew these technologies from urban life. With increasing movement between the valley and the cities, television eventually became a familiar household object despite the opposition it had initially encountered.

Changing Material Culture

Some of the clearest differences between my visits appeared in ordinary household objects. In the earlier years of my fieldwork, I frequently encountered utensils and other items made from gourds, wood and animal hides. Many were much harder to find when I returned later.

Different gourds had particular uses and names. A large gourd called *Toki* (Fig. 2) was used for drinking water, whereas the smaller *Toke* kept salt. *Huchi* and *Hucha*, both larger gourds, were used for milk and *Iassi* respectively. I saw these objects being used during my earlier fieldwork. Manufactured containers and utensils later became more readily available, and the gourds gradually became less common.



Fig. 2. Toki, a gourd traditionally used for drinking water in Darel Valley (Photo by the author, 2000).

Animal hides supplied material for several other objects. People made ropes and bags from them, while buffalo hide was used to make cords called *Jikan* for chairs and cots. Hides were also fashioned into coats and socks. Another locally used object, the *tharigy*, played a role in preparing butter and *lassi* when milk was churned.

By my later visits, many of these objects had become rare. Their disappearance from household use also meant that the knowledge involved in making and using some of them was passed on less frequently.

Shepherds, Dress and Pastoral Life

The dress of shepherds offered another visible comparison between my visits. A shepherd, locally called *payalo*, traditionally wore clothes suited to pastoral work. These included *thaoti*, long boots made from sheep or goat hides, a *choga*, woollen clothes and a cap. He also carried a club (*shil*).



Fig. 3. A Tangiri shepherd (Payalo) in traditional dress (Photo by the author, 2001).

I saw shepherds wearing this dress during my earlier fieldwork in both Tangir (Fig. 3) and Darel Valleys. On later visits, the complete outfit was less common. Some shepherds still wore *thaoti* and carried a club, but I encountered the *choga* and other woollen clothing less frequently.

Herding itself had not disappeared. Shepherds continued tending their animals even though some of the material objects and clothing formerly associated with pastoral life were no longer as common as I had seen them in earlier years.

Disappearing Customs and Social Memory

Older people in Darel Valley remembered a number of customs that were no longer commonly practised. Among those mentioned during my fieldwork were *Shaloro*, *Chappi ki Rasam*, *Qurmugar*, *Regin*, *Karoos*, *Shoacho* and *Makook*. Their memories provided information about practices that I could no longer observe directly.

Shaloro was associated with the first snowfall in upper Darel. When the first snow arrived, people prepared a special sweet bread with almonds and sent it to relatives in upper and lower Darel. It was more than the exchange of food. Sending *Shaloro* also carried the news that snow had begun

falling in the upper valley. Manikyal, Bala and Pain Padyal, Yeshoot, Biayree and Gabbar are among the villages that receive winter snowfall.

Before mobile communication reached Darel, relatives learned that the first snow had arrived by *Shaloro*. By my later visits, the custom was rarely practised. News of snowfall could by then be communicated immediately by mobile phone. This does not mean that the arrival of mobile communication alone brought the custom to an end; other developments in everyday life may also have played a part. People who had participated in *Shaloro*, however, still remembered its connection with the first winter snow.

Winter Food and Seasonal Adaptation

Rashi, also known as *Nasalo*, followed a different course. It continued to be prepared in parts of Darel, particularly in the upper valley, where heavy winter snowfall can restrict movement between villages.

Preparations began before severe winter conditions set in. People dried vegetables and preserved meat for the colder months. Animals were slaughtered before the onset of severe winter, particularly before late December, and the meat was dried for later consumption. This dried meat is locally called *Rashi* or *Nasalo*.

Traditionally, the meat was hung in a *dango*, a triangular storage space on the upper storey of a building. People could then eat it during winter, when snowfall made movement difficult and fresh meat was not easily available. The practice continued because dried meat still served a practical household purpose during winter.

Fodder also had to be prepared. Before the snow arrived, families stored grass and hay for their livestock. During my visits to upper Darel, I saw fodder arranged over chopped branches of trees (Fig. 4). They used the stored fodder to feed the animals during the long winter months.



Fig. 4. Fodder stored on trees for winter in Darel Valley (Photo by the author, 2000).

Music, Grooming and Changing Youth Culture

Music and personal appearance also differed noticeably from what I had observed during my earlier visits. Music had previously been strongly discouraged, and musicians enjoyed little social acceptance. On later visits, I found it more acceptable, particularly among young Darelis who had studied, worked or lived outside the valley.

The same was true of some aspects of grooming. Shaving the beard had once been strongly disapproved of, and I did not see barber shops in Darel during my earlier visits. Barber shops later opened in Gumari, the valley's headquarters, in 2022. Young Darelis returning from towns and cities also brought grooming styles that had previously been uncommon.

Food habits were changing as well. Manufactured food products that I had rarely observed during my earlier fieldwork were more readily seen during later visits. They did not, however, completely displace older food practices. Both could be found alongside each other.

Discussion

My visits to Darel between 2000 and 2023 revealed no single direction of social and cultural transformation. The differences I observed were uneven. Mobile phones spread rapidly, manufactured goods replaced many locally made objects, and attitudes towards music, grooming, and weapons changed. Other aspects of life proved more persistent. Herding remained part of everyday life, although on my later visits I did not always see shepherds wearing the dress that I had observed in earlier years. Rashi/*Nasalo* was also still prepared for winter. The continuation of these practices alongside other developments in the valley does not fit easily into a simple movement from an older social order to a modern one. Hussain (2015), writing about Hunza, also questions such a clear separation between remoteness and modernity in mountain societies.

Migration was another recurring feature of my fieldwork in Darel Valley. Many Darelis I met had moved to Rawalpindi, Abbottabad, Karachi and other cities, but they continued to visit their villages and keep in contact with relatives. They also returned with goods and experiences from the places where they had lived or worked. Benz (2016) describes similar connections between migrants and their home communities in Gojal. In their study of Shimshal, Cook and Butz (2018) discuss mobility and people's movement beyond the valley. These places have different social settings, but the studies offer useful comparisons with what I observed in Darel. Basch et al. (1994) discuss migrants' continuing ties to their places of origin in a much broader transnational context, whereas the migration I recorded from Darel was largely within Pakistan.

Mobile communication noticeably changed how people kept in touch. Before towers were installed around the end of 2011, I met Darelis who travelled to Shatial when they needed to telephone relatives, loved ones or business contacts. After 2012, they could make these calls from within Darel. I had seen people travelling outside the valley for this purpose during my earlier fieldwork, so the difference was particularly noticeable when I returned in later years.

People also used mobile phones for business, arranging journeys and contacting family members living elsewhere in Pakistan. These uses were closely connected with existing social relationships. Horst and Miller (2006) make a similar point in their anthropological study of mobile phones. Closer to Darel, Rahim et al. (2020) recorded their use for communication and access to information in rural mountain communities of Gilgit-Baltistan. Walter (2021), writing about Gilgit, also shows how mobile communication became embedded in interpersonal relationships. In Darel, I found phones used within established family, village, and kinship networks, including relations with Darelis living outside the valley.

I also noticed young Darelis using social media in ways that I had not observed during my earlier visits. Some posted photographs and videos of Darel on Facebook, showing its landscapes, cultural heritage and everyday life. Others used TikTok and attracted followers from outside the valley. Through these platforms, images and videos of Darel began reaching people far beyond the villages where they were made.

I noticed another difference when I returned to Darel in later years. During my early fieldwork, I often saw men carrying guns, which were associated with security, disputes, power and male status. On later visits, I saw fewer guns among younger educated men and those who had studied or worked outside the valley. Mobile phones, meanwhile, had become a common sight in their hands.

It would be misleading to suggest that one object simply replaced the other. Nor can reduced involvement in feuds be attributed to education alone. Education, employment, migration, and wider social interaction were all part of the setting in which younger Darelis formed different experiences and aspirations.

Material culture tells a somewhat different story. Toki, *Toke*, *Huchi* and *Hucha*, objects made from animal hides, and parts of the *payalo's* dress became less common as manufactured alternatives became readily available. In some cases, the decline of an object also meant that the skill required to make or use it was encountered less often. Nevertheless, this did not necessarily mean the associated activity had vanished. Shepherds continued to tend their animals even when the *choga* and other elements of their earlier dress were no longer commonly worn. What disappeared, in this case, was part of the material culture surrounding pastoralism rather than pastoralism itself.

The contrast between *Shaloro* and *Rashi/Nasalo* is especially instructive because both were associated with winter but did not meet the same fate. *Shaloro* was connected with the first snowfall, kinship and the circulation of news. Sending sweet bread to relatives also informed them that snow had arrived in upper Darel. Once mobile phones could convey news immediately, this function was no longer as necessary. The decline of *Shaloro* cannot, however, be explained by mobile communication alone. Other developments in everyday life may also have contributed, even though its decline coincided with a very different communicative environment.

Rashi/Nasalo responded to another need. Heavy snowfall could restrict movement in upper Darel, making stored food important during winter. Drying meat before severe winter therefore continued to have practical value. The same was true of collecting grass and hay for livestock before snowfall.

A mobile phone could alter how quickly information travelled, but it could not change the winter conditions for which households had long prepared.

Across the years of my fieldwork, these examples make Darel Valley difficult to describe through a simple division between tradition and modernity. People who moved to cities continued to maintain close relations with their villages, while mobile phones made communication with relatives much easier. Manufactured goods became common, and some locally made objects gradually disappeared from household use, but the activities connected with them did not necessarily disappear. The customs I recorded did not all follow the same course. Some had become rare by my later visits, while others were still practised because they remained part of everyday life. I therefore found new technologies and ways of living alongside practices that people in Darel continued to use.

Conclusion

I first visited Darel in 2000 and made my last field visit in 2023, returning several times in between. Comparing my notes from these visits showed differences in some aspects of everyday life, while other practices remained familiar. Migration, education and new technologies were among the developments I observed, but they did not affect every aspect of life in the same way.

The movement of Darelis to Rawalpindi, Abbottabad, Karachi and other cities did not cut their ties with their home villages. People returned to Darel and remained in contact with their families, bringing with them objects and experiences acquired elsewhere. Mobile phones made this contact much easier. During my early fieldwork, people sometimes travelled to Shatial simply to make a telephone call; after mobile service reached Darel, they could make the same contact from within the valley. This was among the most visible differences between my earlier and later visits.

Material culture and local customs followed different paths. Some locally made household objects became rare as manufactured alternatives became available, and elements of shepherds' traditional dress were less commonly seen. Yet pastoralism continued. The same difference appears in *Shaloro* and *Rashi/Nasalo*. *Shaloro* had largely declined by my later visits, whereas dried meat preparation continued because it remained useful during the severe winters of upper Darel.

Darel's experience therefore cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between tradition and modernity. Practices persisted, altered or declined according to their place in people's lives and the circumstances in which they were used. Across more than two decades of fieldwork, Darel emerged as a valley where new technologies and ways of living entered everyday life without bringing all older practices to an end.

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