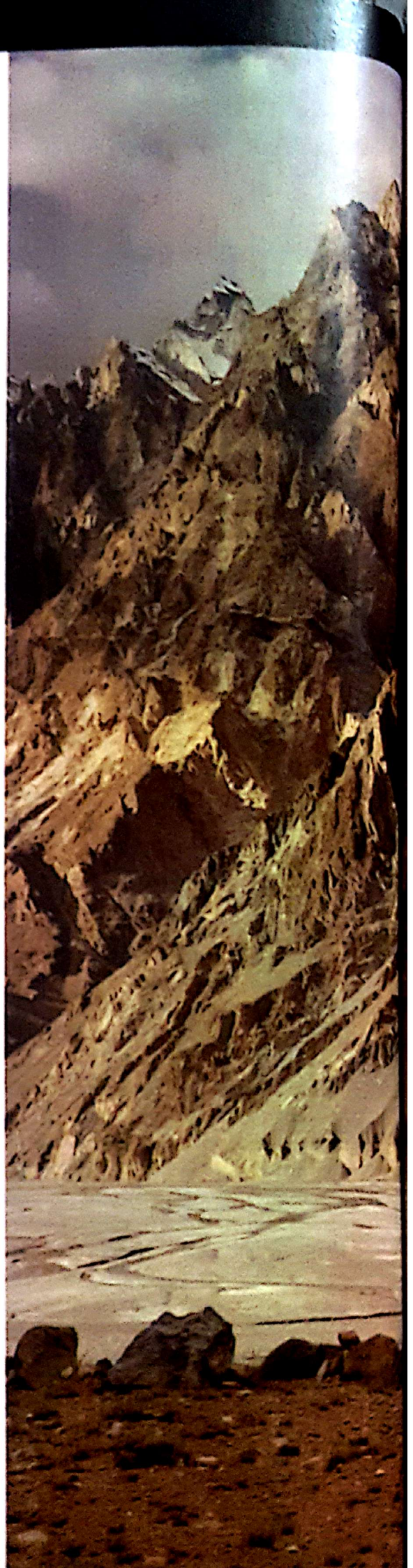


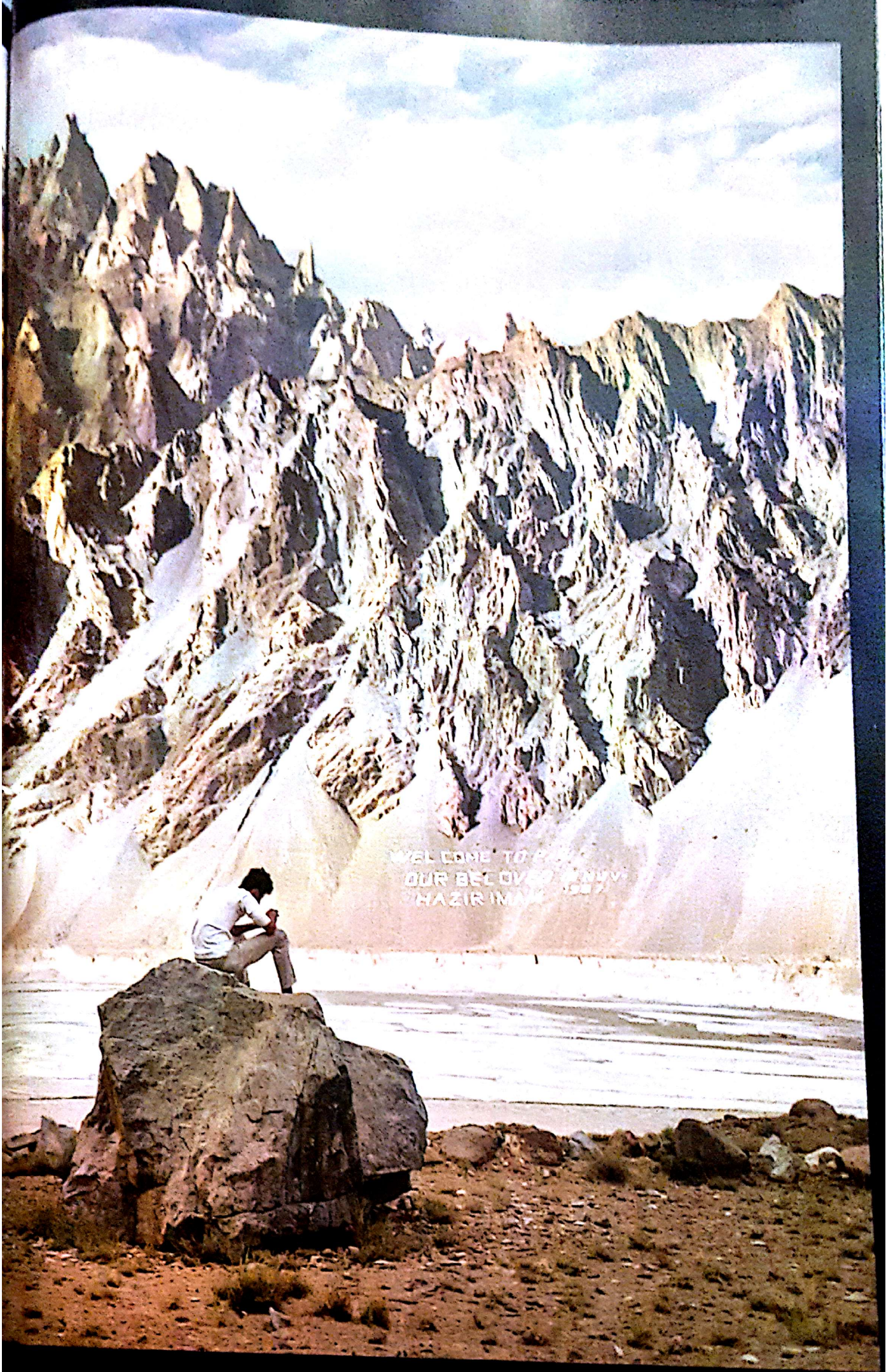
| DISPATCHES | PAKISTAN

Home on the Range

In a remote, mountainous region of Pakistan, technology and education redefine village traditions.

Above the village of Pasu, a teenager checks his smartphone. Locals here are Ismaili, followers of a moderate branch of Islam whose imam is the Aga Khan. Writing on the slope recalls the Aga Khan's 1987 visit to the area.





WELCOME TO PAKISTAN
OUR BELOVED HUNDI
HAZIR IMAGE 1987

In 1999, when I first trekked in the Karakoram Mountains of Pakistan, the area drew tens of thousands of tourists a year. I was instantly drawn to one region, Gojal.

Nestled below peaks near the Chinese and Afghan borders, Gojal's villages are home to some 20,000 people: Ismailis, followers of a moderate branch of Islam led by the Aga Khan, who are also Wakhis, members of an ethnic group with Persian origins. Since "the terrible September 11th attacks," said local tour guide Karim Jan, few tourists have come. Like others in Pakistan, Gojalis have suffered from the association of their nation with terrorism and violence, and many feel helpless to change it.

I've visited Gojal repeatedly over the years, including last summer with my family, and what I've seen belies that reputation. I hope my photos and words can add nuance to people's understanding of this place.

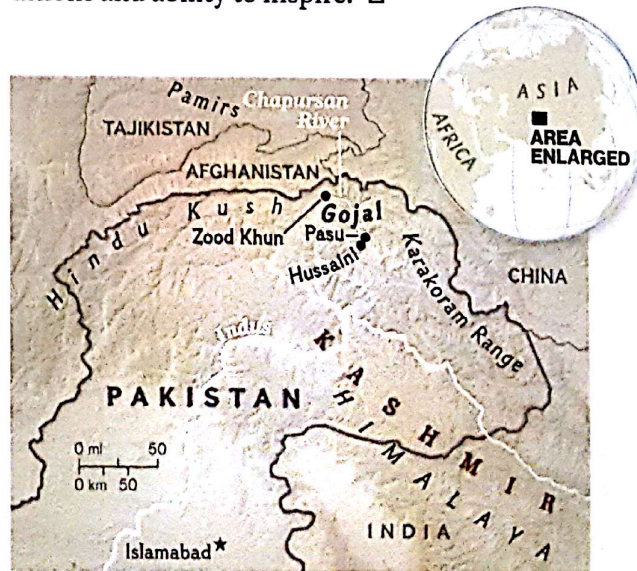
Surrounded by glaciers and unscaled mountains, the Ismailis had long lived in relative isolation. But new inventions and advances have let the outside world in. On each visit I've noticed more changes. The improved Karakoram Highway, once passable only in jeeps and 4x4s, now carries visitors from southern Pakistani cities. The villages' young men and women go to those cities to get educated, as their imam urges. They come back for summer holidays dressed in hip fashions.

Last year when I visited a group of young men in the village of Pasu, some wore designer T-shirts, jeans, styled beards, and ponytails; others wore traditional white pants and long shirts. One of them, Sajid Alvi, spoke excitedly about leaving soon for Sweden, where he had a grant to pursue a Ph.D.: "I will work on developing new aerospace materials—real geeky stuff!" But it's not only the young men finding opportunities beyond the village, Alvi said. Pointing to young women playing volleyball nearby, he said, "They are all going to school, and most of them speak at least four languages." He quoted a local saying: If a family can't afford to educate both its son and its daughter, "give the education to the girl."

Esar Ali agreed that changes in village life "come a lot from our education...But they also come from this," he said, pointing to his phone. Smartphones and mobile data networks have affected daily life and old traditions—courtship, for one. Recalling where he first met his future wife, Shayna, Ali noted, "There is a decent 2G reception there." Until recently parents arranged marriages, and couples had little contact beforehand. But Ali said he and Shayna "started messaging, slowly established our relationship," then asked their parents if they could marry. "In our tradition, to be with someone is something sacred...Phone or no phone, we have to keep our customs alive," he said.

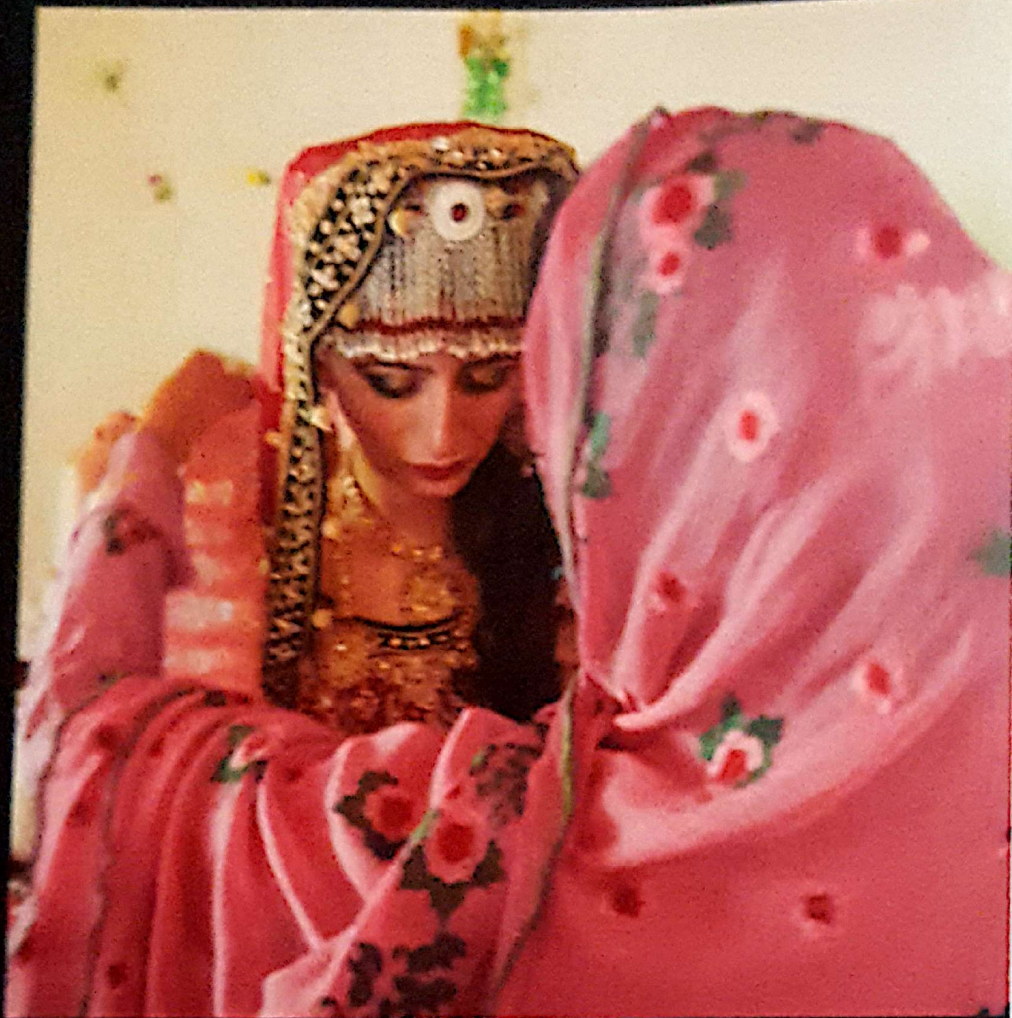
During my family's Gojal visit, we went to a wedding celebration. My two young sons were swept into a cricket match. My wife and I were asked to join a group selfie with the bride and her friends. There was no such thing as an uninvited guest.

"In these remote parts our relationship to our honored guests has never changed," Jan said. "Our kids go away to the cities, but deep down we are just mountain farmers." Gojal has planted a foot in the modern world, but it retains its traditions and ability to inspire. □

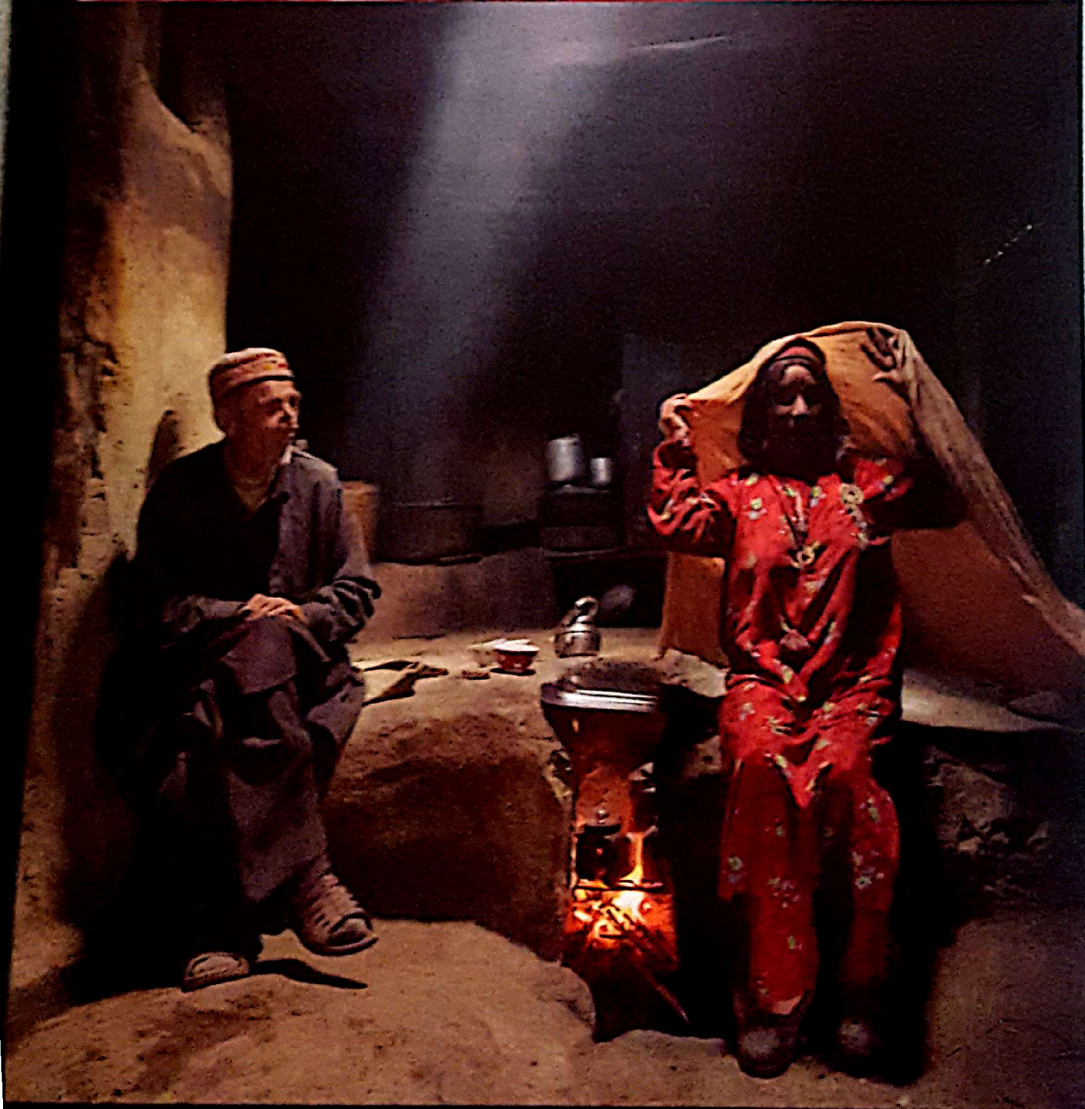


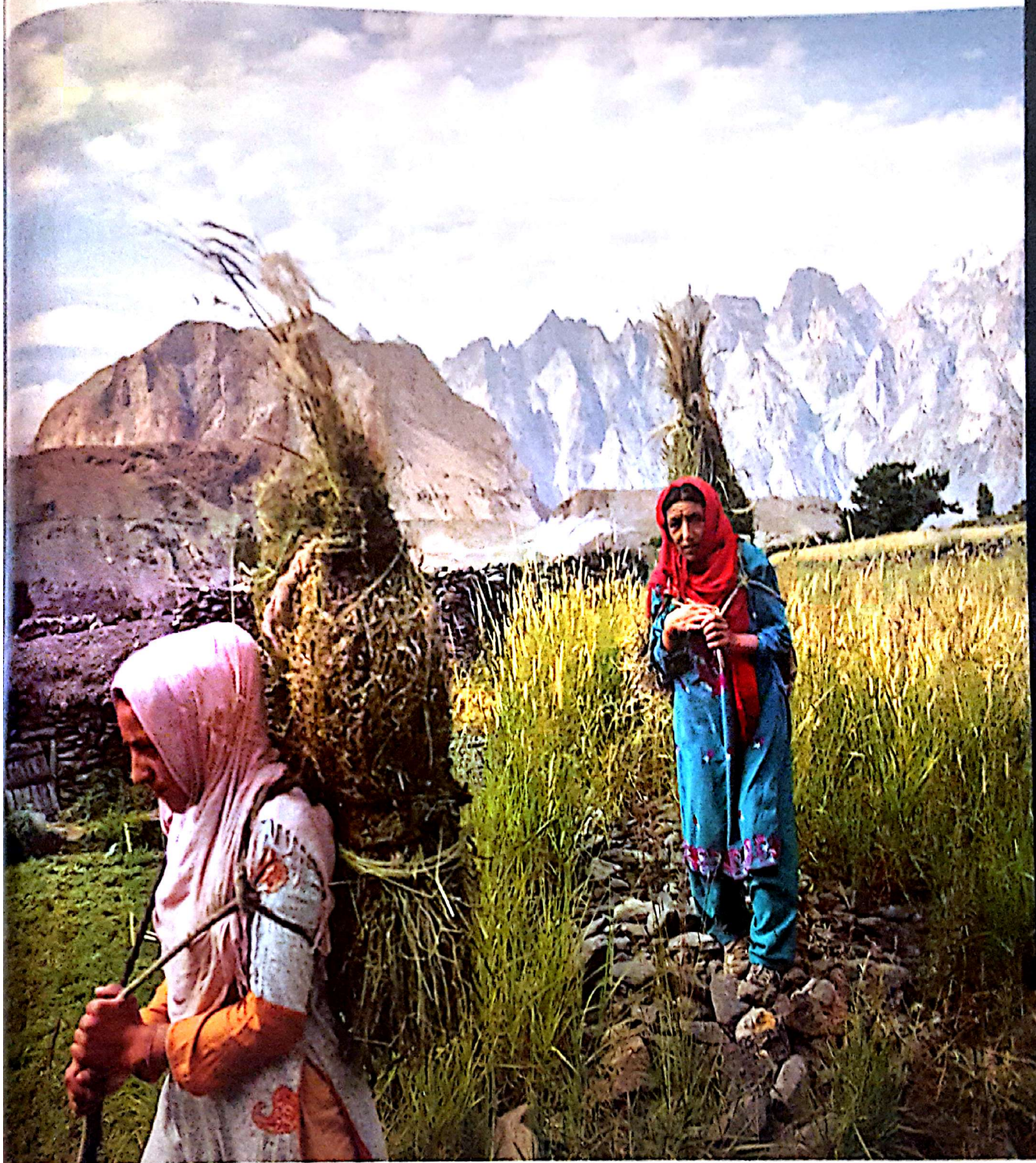
At a primary school in the village of Zood Khun, girls assemble to welcome a new teacher. Meanwhile, in the room next door, boys at an assembly discuss an excursion to the edge of the Chappursan River Valley, which runs parallel to Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor – an area that once was part of the Silk Road. In Ismaili culture a strong emphasis is placed on education, particularly for girls.





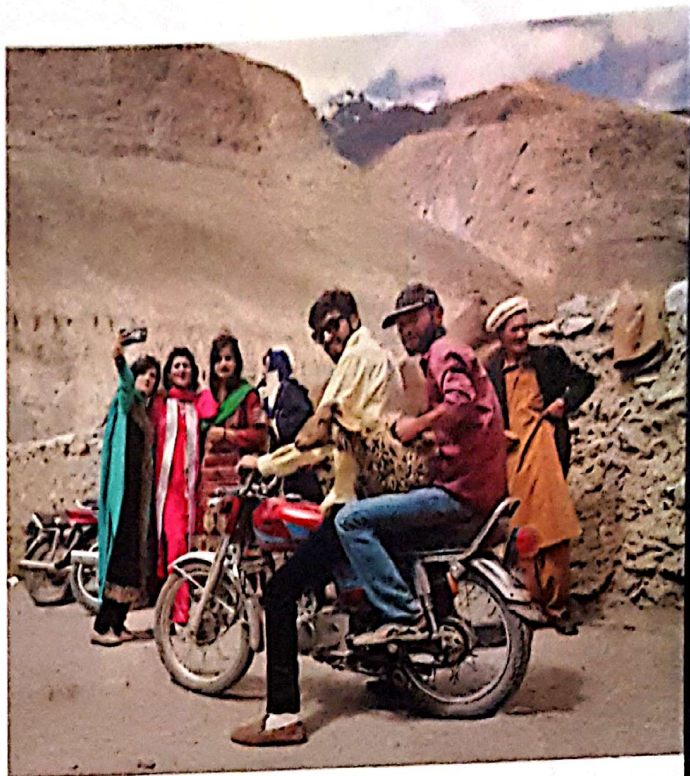
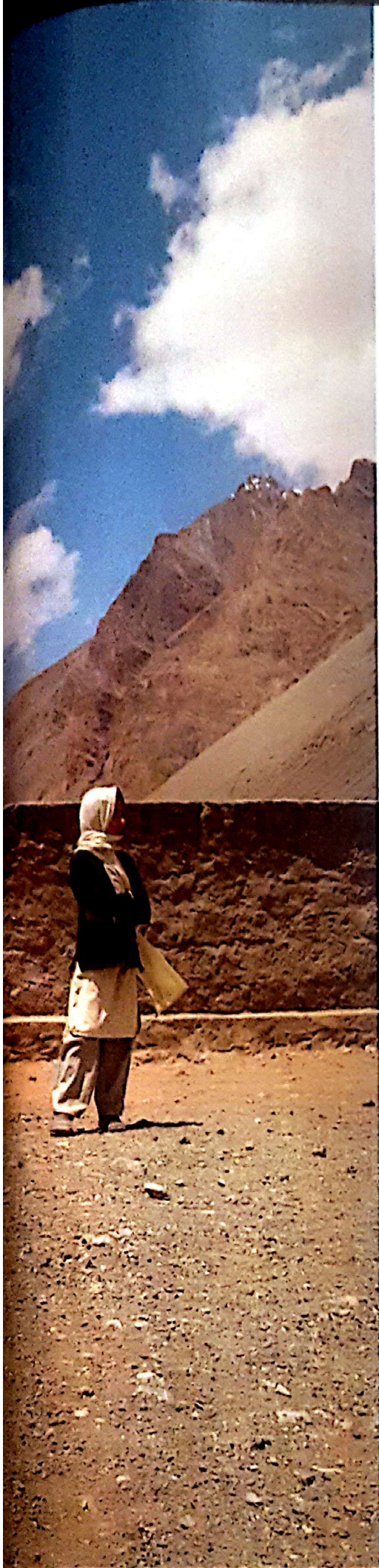
An Ismaili bride awaits the arrival of her future husband. For years marriages in the Gojal region had been arranged by the bride's and groom's parents. Today many couples meet on social media sites and refer with pride to their bonds as "arranged love marriages." In an outlying settlement, a Wakhi couple brew tea inside their traditional mud home.





A mother and daughter, members of the Wakhi ethnic group, return from collecting fodder for their animals. The chore requires a two-hour round-trip on foot between their village, Hussaini, and their summer pastures. These chores may be done interchangeably by men or women.





At a school in Zood Khun, girls play a game of cricket during a break. Also in Zood Khun, family members of a soon-to-be-married bride pause to snap a selfie before the “love marriage” festivities begin.