



## SECTARIAN AND ETHNIC MARGINALISATION IN GILGIT-BALTISTAN

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### **Abstract**

*The construction of the Karakoram Highway in the 1980s, which connected this once inaccessible region to Pakistan and rest of the world, changed the profile of the region. Initially, it brought with it feelings of openness, connectivity, hope and business opportunities with China but it ushered in unprecedented socio-cultural and economic change in Gilgit and Baltistan. It also altered work patterns as well as the social, political and cultural landscape, and agricultural practices and worst of all, it also brought with it outsiders, who have managed to spread fanaticism in the area and change the unique culture of the region which was strongly seeped in its Buddhist past. Many residents complain that they were ill prepared to embrace the 'change', these outsiders wish to impose. Both Iranian Revolution and Talibanisation of Afghanistan have had deep impact in the region and have brought in clerics who are keen to establish their own brand of puritanical Islam in the region. The paper attempts to analyse the attempts of Pakistani establishment to forcibly assimilate Gilgit-Baltistan, a part of Pakistani occupied Kashmir into Pakistan by changing the demographic character and the local population's violent reactions to these attempts at marginalising them. The local inhabitants have a unique culture of their own and follow different strands of Shiaism.*

**Keywords:** Northern Areas, Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK), Shia, Jammu & Kashmir

### **Introduction**

Sectarianism and Ethnic Marginalisation in the Gilgit-Baltistan region of undivided State of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), currently controlled by Pakistan, needs to be highlighted as it not only fuels mass discontent but also keeps the region boiling. The brunt of the radical Islamization policy of General Zia-ul-Haq in this region focused on settling outsiders in the area, impacting directly and adversely on the local people. The policy of Islamization, the Afghan crisis in the 1980s, the revolution in Iran in 1979, have all had a cumulative effect on sectarian turmoil. Traditionally, the people of Gilgit-Baltistan are peace loving. There are reports of many inter-ethnic and inter-tribe marriages in the region and ethnic ties and tribal loyalties conventionally surpassed sectarian identities. However, things have drastically changed in the area since it came under Pakistani rule, and took a sharp turn for the worse since the late 1980s. Today the entire population has been divided on a

sectarian basis. The situation has reached such a stage over the past two decades that petty issues are enough to spark bloody sectarian clashes.

The region was annexed by Pakistan during the tumultuous era of 1947-48, after the then princely state of Jammu and Kashmir had acceded to India. Gilgit-Baltistan, as this region is often referred to in local literature, came under Pakistani control, when the British Commander of Gilgit Scouts, Major Brown declared accession to Pakistan on November 4, 1947. Soon the region was named 'The Northern Areas of Pakistan' and was put under the direct control of Islamabad, separate from Pakistan-Administered 'Azad (Independent) Kashmir'. Unlike Pakistan's four provinces, Gilgit-Baltistan has no political representation in the parliament or the federal cabinet and no status under Pakistan's constitution. Also, unlike the other parts of Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK) called 'Azad Kashmir' which has a modicum of self governance; these areas are directly administered by Islamabad through a non-elected federal minister for 'Northern Areas'.

Since 1948, there has been mutual jostling over the ownership of this vital strategic area amongst various ethnic and sectarian groups that are indigenous to the region as well as those that has been brought in by various regimes from outside. Since Zia-ul-Haq started his Islamisation drive in Pakistan, there has been a serious sectarian divide, which got further accentuated after the Iranian Revolution. There have been numerous reports of mass persecution of people following different strands of Shiaism. Overwhelming majority of the population of the area is believed to follow different schools of Shiaism. In the recent past the schools in the region had to remain closed for almost a year because different sects could not agree on the contents of the text books. There have been numerous acts of violence where people have invariably targeted the symbols of government authority like police personnel and government officials. These are nothing but manifestation of people's alienation with the government. Recent statements by members of Gilgit Baltistan United Movement where they have not only accused Indian government of not doing enough for them but have also demanded reservation in Indian educational institutions for the residents of 'Northern Areas', shows the level of their alienation with Pakistan.

### **Geo-Strategic Situation**

The sparsely populated mountainous region has an area of 28,000 square miles, which makes it slightly smaller than North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and more than six times the size of 'Azad Kashmir'. Famous for its peaks, rivers, glaciers and exotic cultures, the region is divided into six districts of Gilgit, Skardu, Diamer, Ghizer, Ghanche and Astore. With the Karakoram, Himalaya and Hindukush ranges as a backdrop, the region

shares borders with China, Jammu and Kashmir, Afghanistan and Chitral district of NWFP. The Karakoram Mountains surrounding Gilgit and Baltistan have 28 peaks with heights exceeding 20,000 feet and the region is home to the biggest glaciers in the world outside the Polar Regions. The climate is extremely cold in winter and temperate in summer. The population of the region is around two million (562,000 according to 1981 census) and comprises of numerous ethnic groups and tribes. Geopolitically it is one of the most sensitive areas of Pakistan and has assumed additional political and strategic importance with the opening of the Karakoram Highway, which links China to Pakistan and reportedly generates trade worth billions of dollars. The region, however, has become the stage for violent protests by the impoverished population of Gilgit and Baltistan, which believes that their unique ethno-cultural and religious identity is being threatened. The alienation of the populace in Gilgit and Baltistan is increasing and besides ethnicity has a strong sectarian undertone.

The region was annexed by Pakistan, when some troops of the State Forces revolted, as they had been subverted by Pakistani propaganda and were made to believe that the Maharaja Hari Singh the then ruler of Jammu and Kashmir had fled Srinagar and the city had fallen to Pakistani raiders. Gilgit Scouts, a local militia led by Major William Brown, a British officer and the subverted troops surrounded the house of Brigadier Ghansara Singh, the governor appointed by Maharaja Hari Singh and forced him to surrender. After the Governor's arrest a provisional government of 'People's Republic of Gilgit and Baltistan' was set up. It was headed by one local Rais Khan and included Major Brown, Captain Ihsan Ali, Capt Hassan (both of State Forces), Captain Sayeed, Lieutenant Haider, Subedar Major Babar Khan (all three from Gilgit Scouts) and Wazir Wilayat Ali. On November 4, 1947 Pakistani flag was hoisted at the Gilgit Scouts lines by Major Brown. Brown described his action as a 'coup d' etat' and informed Peshawar about the accession of Gilgit to Pakistan. Sir George Cunningham, the new governor of the NWFP on hearing of Brown's coup in Gilgit instructed him to restore order. Subsequently, the rulers of the enclaves of Hunza and Nagar, within the Gilgit Agency, which were vassals of the Maharaja of Kashmir also declared their accession to Pakistan.

Major Brown sent frantic wireless messages to Pakistani authorities in Peshawar to take over the area and as a result Pakistan sent Sardar Mohammad Alam as its first political agent. The accession was formalised by signing an agreement with presidents of 'Azad Kashmir' and Muslim Conference on April 28, 1949. The agreement attempted to legitimise Pakistani administrative control over Gilgit and Baltistan. The agreement however,

lacked public support or legal basis, as the contracting parties neither represented the people of Gilgit and Baltistan, nor, the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir. Since then, Pakistani policy makers have kept the constitutional status of the region in a limbo, making Gilgit-Baltistan an extraordinary example of political and judicial ambivalence.

After the ceasefire the people were put under the control of a Resident who exercised total judicial and administrative control over the area. Liaqat Ali Khan decided that Gilgit and Baltistan should not be incorporated into Pakistan's democratic structures. As a result the area was kept constitutionally separate from rest of Pakistan and ruled directly by the Ministry of Kashmir Affairs in Karachi. In 1952, the Joint Secretary in the ministry was made the ex-officio Resident of 'Northern Areas'. In 1967 a separate post of Resident based at Gilgit was created. Though the 1949 agreement lapsed after the promulgation of 1970 Act by President Yahya Khan, Pakistan has refused to return the areas to 'Azad Kashmir' despite being told by the courts to do so. Frontier Crimes Regulations (FCR), which treated tribesmen as barbaric and uncivilised and levied collective fines and punishments and had been imposed by the British on the recalcitrant tribes of the Frontier Region were retained in Gilgit and Baltistan. In 1963 Pakistan gave away 2500 square miles of the territory of the former state of Hunza to China as part of Sino-Pak Agreement, despite opposition by Mir of Hunza.

Right from the beginning Pakistan was apprehensive about the population of the region as this is the only region under Pakistani control, where Shias are in majority. As a result none of the democratic institutions of Pakistan or even 'Azad Kashmir' were extended to the region and the people were denied a chance to govern themselves. The region has never been represented in Pakistani parliament or in 'Azad Kashmir Assembly'. In 1973, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's government initiated reforms in the Gilgit-Baltistan region after abolishing the traditional rules of Mirs and Rajas and the FCR. In 1970 an Advisory Council with 14 elected members was set up and was converted in to 'Northern Areas' Council in 1975, but it continued without any legislative or executive powers and was presided over by the Administrator. In 1999 it was expanded and renamed as 'Northern Areas' Legislative Council (NALC). In 2000 the post of speaker and in 2002 the post of deputy speaker were created. During the tenure of first NALC from 1999 to 2004, it failed to legislate on any subject. It did pass 18 resolutions recommending issues of public interest to Ministry of Kashmir Affairs and 'Northern Areas' (KANA), however, none of these were executed. An appellate court was established in May 2005. However, its administration

resides with KANA, which not only raises questions about its autonomy but also creates problems of credibility.

### **Sectarian Violence: the Beginning**

Though the discontentment amongst the people of Gilgit and Baltistan had been brewing ever since Pakistani occupation in view of the denial of constitutional mechanism to voice their grievances, yet the situation began changing for the worse with the construction of the Karakoram Highway in the 1980s, which connected this once inaccessible region to the rest of Pakistan and brought with it religious fanatics, who have managed to spread sectarianism in the area. The attempts by Zia-ul-Haq to introduce Sunni Deobandi Islam in the region exacerbated the sense of alienation in Gilgit and Baltistan. As a result the Sunni Deobandi militant groups especially Sipah-e-Sahaba spread their tentacles in this remote tribal region and the Shias and the Ismailis were made to submit to their puritanical aggression. The local population perceived the local administration to be siding with these Sunni extremists. This resulted in the first major violent manifestation of their discontent by the majority Shias in Gilgit in May 1988. This was perceived by Pakistani establishment to be an Iranian sponsored 'Shia Revolt'. Zia put a Special Service Group (SSG) group commanded by then Brigadier Pervez Musharraf to suppress the revolt and Musharraf responded by transporting a large number of Wahabi Pakhtoon tribesmen from the NWFP and Afghanistan to Gilgit to teach the Shias a lesson. These tribesmen massacred hundreds of Shias.

According to Pakistani news magazine Herald, "In May 1988, low-intensity political rivalry and sectarian tension ignited into full-scale carnage as thousands of armed tribesmen from outside Gilgit district invaded Gilgit along the Karakoram Highway. Nobody stopped them. They destroyed crops and houses, lynched and burnt people to death in the villages around Gilgit town. The number of dead and injured was put in the hundreds. But numbers alone tell nothing of the savagery of the invading hordes and the chilling impact it has left on these peaceful valleys. " Ever since the people of Gilgit and Baltistan perceive Pakhtoons both from NWFP as well as refugees from their troubled neighbour Afghanistan, as hatchet men of Pakistani establishment.

Musharraf also initiated a policy of bringing in Punjabis and Pakhtoons from outside and settling them in Gilgit and Baltistan in order to reduce the Kashmiri Shias to a minority in their traditional land and the process continues to this date. The rapid settling-in of Punjabis and Pakhtoons from outside has created a sense of acute insecurity among the local Shias. It is widely believed in Pakistan that a Shia airman from Gilgit,

wanting to take revenge for the May 1988, carnage, was responsible for the air crash that killed General Zia. After 1988 sectarian riots became a regular feature of Gilgit and Baltistan. The pattern showed that that whenever the populace in Gilgit and Baltistan demanded their constitutional rights, there were riots. On Zia's death anniversary on August 17, 1993 there were massive riots and over 20 persons were killed before the situation was brought under control by the Army. Army had accused that Shias had amassed weapons in mosques, which included M-46 bombs, which were brought from Iran. This followed persecution of Shias and a large number of Shias were arrested.

Since 1988, increased persecution has created a strong sense of alienation in the populace of Gilgit-Baltistan and has led to the creation of ultra nationalist political groupings like Balwaristan National Front. During 2003-04 Shias objected to certain portions of the school course curriculum, particularly the contents of Islamiyat and Urdu text books and the popular discontentment was so high that the authorities were forced to accept the Shia view point after the violent riots in June 2004. Imam Aga Syed Ziauddin Rizvi the local Shia cleric helped the authorities in trying to resolve the issue to the satisfaction of Shias. However the issue was so emotive that all schools in Gilgit and Baltistan remained closed for one full year till April 2005 and could only be reopened after all controversial portions were removed to the satisfaction of all sects.

Sunni radicals who had been used to getting their way were quite unhappy with this accommodation of Shia viewpoint by the government and this sense of outrage probably led to the assassination of widely respected Shia cleric Aga Ziauddin. On January 8, 2005 Aga Ziauddin was critically injured when gunmen opened fire on his car in Gilgit, the administrative headquarters of Gilgit-Baltistan. 15 persons died in violent protests before some modicum of governance was restored. On January 13, 2005 Aga Ziauddin died of his wounds in the military hospital in Rawalpindi. The news of his death enraged his supporters, mainly in Gilgit and Baltistan and a curfew had to be imposed in Gilgit and Skardu, the two major towns of the region. A large number of government buildings were set on fire and a number of officials and their families were attacked and troops had to be deployed to restore law and order. Gilgit and Baltistan continued to simmer weeks after the incident. A number of towns remained under curfew for weeks, telephone lines were disconnected and night time curfew continued for over a month.

After the incidents of January 2005 a façade of normalcy was being maintained but violence kept erupting from time to time. In a stark reminder of the situation, the Inspector General of Police, the highest ranking police officer was assassinated along

with his bodyguards, on March 23, while travelling between Gilgit and Hunza. He was known to have been imbued with extreme Sunni views during his earlier assignment in Afghanistan as a diplomat and was seen to be biased by the local Shia community. His murder sent shock waves through the establishment. The situation forced the government to shut down educational institutions, clamp curfew and call in the Army, contingent of the Punjab Rangers and the Northern Area Scouts besides taking other administrative measures. On, April 23, a bus carrying passengers from Skardu to Islamabad was intercepted at Bhasha right across the boundary of Gilgit and Baltistan and two ethnic minorities from Baltistan were shot at point blank range. When the bodies reached Skardu, the entire region was in flames.

In an apparent attempt to cool down passions and restore normalcy, the government agreed to withdraw the controversial textbooks of 'Islamiyat' and Urdu from the curriculum. However, a fresh wave of violence engulfed Gilgit and surrounding areas, when five passengers of a bus travelling from Gilgit to Islamabad were killed on the Karakoram Highway on July 17, 2005 near Chilas, six others were injured in the incident. Six more deaths were reported in revenge attacks, which left the region paralysed for over a week. Gilgit was still reeling from the shock of the fresh spate of sectarian attacks when a union council chairman and three others were gunned down in a suburban area, triggering clashes between residents and police. Subsequently, the house of a local journalist was bombed in Gilgit on July 25. The situation turned so bad that shoot at sight orders had to be issued. Despite such strong measures, sporadic cases of violence continued in the region.

### **Current Status**

In the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, when entire Pakistani state's attention was focussed on Azad Kashmir and NWFP, the Gilgit and Baltistan erupted again. The new cycle of violence started on October 11, 2005, when a group of Sunnis opened fire on a Shia group, fifty-eight kilometres from Gilgit at Basen killing two and wounding others. Two of the gunmen escaped but one of them was injured and was nabbed by the local police. The police took him to the district headquarters in Gilgit but the Pakistan Rangers took him out of the custody of the local police. When the Shia community found out about this change of hand, they protested and were dispersed by the Rangers using tear gas. Out of the ten protesters arrested by the Rangers, a 15-year-old Maqsood Hussain's body was found on October 12 in a nalla leading to more protests and demonstration by the people. On October 13, 2005, a group of Shia students clashed with the Pakistani Rangers in Gilgit and in the violence that followed six people, including two personnel of the Pakistani Rangers, were

killed. This led to further skirmishes in which more people died. The Shia community thereafter blocked parts of the Karakoram Highway to protest against the deaths. Curfew was imposed in the city, for weeks. Several people were arrested and a cache of weapons, including rocket launchers and AK-47 rifles, were also recovered. At least 15 people were killed in only two days of sectarian violence in Gilgit town. This was the first time when heavy weapons like rocket launchers and bombs were used in the region.

Since October 2005 sporadic cases of violence have been reported from the region. The buses plying on Karakoram Highway have been regularly attacked especially in Sunni dominated Chilas Valley, where inhabitants are known for their hostility to Shias living further North. The government officials, including those of Army, Northern Light Infantry and police, have been identified and murdered while travelling in buses in areas falling under the control of rival sects. Casualties due to bomb explosions, ambushes and sniper firing have become a daily routine and so is the blockade of the Karakoram Highway. The gravity of the situation is best exemplified by the sacking of three police officers of the rank of SP for refusing to join duty in Gilgit. If the senior police officers prefer sacking to serving in the region, the fate of other government officials can be well imagined. Fatalities since January 8, 2005, when Shia cleric Aga Ziauddin Rizvi and 18 others were killed in Gilgit, had crossed the 100 mark by the end of 2005. In March 2006, a day after Muharram Shia protesters blocked the strategically-located Gilgit-Skardu and the Gilgit-Hunza roads over Islamabad's decision to incarcerate senior Shia cleric Aga Rahat Kazmi. In April 2006, the government moves to shift the district headquarters of newly created Astore district from Shia dominated Eidgah town to Sunni dominated Gorikot, saw night long gun battles being fought between police and Shia residents resulting in death of two women. Again after a brief lull a judge Jamshed Khan of the anti terrorism court, who had been conducting trials in the cases related to previous sectarian clashes in the region, was shot dead in Gilgit on June 24, 2006.

The declaration by President Musharraf that Bhasha Dam will be the first mega dam to be constructed and the subsequent inauguration of the project by President Musharraf on April 26, 2006 has caused immense consternation in the region as it will inundate large tracts of land in Diamer district of Northern Areas. In addition Pakistani establishment has also proposed the construction of a huge 35 million acre feet dam at Skardu, which will submerge the entire Skardu bowl, the hub of Balti cultural heritage. The Baltis feel that the proposed dam is nothing but an attempt to bulldoze and subdue the already poor and marginalised Baltis in Skardu. There has been large scale opposition to the



proposals for the construction of the dam. Even Kashmiri outfits like Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) have come out strongly against the dams and have demanded that Bhasha Dam be named as Diamer Dam and all the royalty from the dam should come to Northern Areas. The students in Northern Areas have also been asserting that Chitral and Kohistan in NWFP are part of Northern Areas and were separated from it by Pakistan as part of a conspiracy. They have also emphasized that the region is a disputed territory and Pakistan should not build a mega dam without resolving its status. These newer and growing demands are nothing but manifestation of increasing alienation of the population from Pakistan.

### **The Cause of Violence**

The latent sectarianism coupled with lack of representation has aggravated the sense of alienation in the region. The sectarian Sunni threats to the majority Shia population of the area, perceived to be in connivance with the state apparatus, have fuelled the local demands for autonomy and for self determination by the more radical outfits like Balwaristan National Front. The main cause for the growing alienation in the region is the perception that the sectarian and ethnic identity of the region is being diluted often with State connivance. Unlike any part of Pakistan, Gilgit and Baltistan contains a high percentage (majority) of Shias, some tribal in their ethnic origin and many Ismaili - the sect led by the Aga Khan and considered heretics by hard-line Islamists. From being a completely Ismaili (a Shia sub sect) region in history, it has been injected with external populations with the connivance of the government from the rest of Pakistan. As a result, in the subsequent years there has been competition of sorts between various sects and sub-sects. The clerics from other parts of Pakistan have introduced the Twelver Shia (Athna Ashari - official religion of Iran) and Sunni (mainly Deobandi) faiths too. This has resulted in creation of an area where geographic and linguistic boundaries often coincide with the sectarian identities. Different valleys speak different languages and follow different denominations. According to the latest available estimates, the population of the region is now approximately 1.5 million, with around 39 per cent Shia, 27 per cent Sunni, 18 per cent Ismaili and 16 per cent Nurbakhshi. The district wise breakdown is: Gilgit: 54 per cent Shia, 27 per cent Ismaili and 19 per cent Sunni; Skardu: 87 per cent Shia, 10 per cent Nurbakhshi and 3 per cent Sunni; Diamer: 90 per cent Sunni, 10 per cent Shia; Ghizer: 87 per cent Ismaili, 13 per cent Sunni; and Ghanche: 87 per cent Nurbakhshi, 8 per cent Sunni, 5 per cent Shia. Astore, created as a District in 2005, comprises 70 per cent Sunni and 30 per cent Shia.

Poor economic conditions and lack of educational facilities have made Gilgit and Baltistan a hub of communal strife during the last two decades. The basic dynamics of sectarianism in this region resembles that of Pakistan, as they share the same historical trajectory and are the product of the policies of the same ruling elite. External involvement, mostly from other Islamic countries, a weak judicial system, proliferation of small arms, mushrooming of sectarian madaris and the use of religious groups to meet Pakistan's internal and external policy objectives are cited as the major reasons for the current sectarian situation. Ironically, the impoverished parents have no choice but to put their children in madaris - the ubiquitous nurseries of religious extremism. As a result, today, Gilgit-Baltistan produces more ulemas (religious scholars) than Punjab or Sindh. Due to the lack of true understanding of the Islamic teachings and aversion towards the modern education of science and technology, the ulema unintentionally and at times intentionally instigate sectarian hatred that quite often leads to violence.

Traditionally, the people of Gilgit and Baltistan have been non-violent. Different sects had lived there peacefully, inter-married and even joined hands to improve their lot on a self-help basis. However, the activities of religious militants in the wake of Pakistan's involvement in the Afghan war and the rein given to religious groups have vitiated the atmosphere. A vast majority of Shias in the region feel that an attempt is being made to marginalise them with the connivance of Pakistani Government. They cite the incidents of 1988 as proof because the complicity of Zia's government was clearly evident when Gilgit was attacked by Sunni Lashkar. The civil and military law enforcement agencies had made no attempts to intervene. Subsequently the sectarian riots were engineered to divide the people whenever they demanded their legitimate political rights. There were newspaper reports that officials themselves were encouraging riots to prolong Islamabad's unconstitutional rule. Subsequently, the Lashkar-e-Tayba gained influence in the region during the Kargil Operation in 1999. Today the entire population is divided on the lines of belief and faith (sect). Different interpretations of the same faith (Ismailis consider themselves as distinct from other Shias) have bifurcated the society into hard-line groups. Although people of differing shades of faiths normally cohabit side by side in peace and harmony, yet petty issues tend to spark bloody clashes amongst them. In 2004-05 differences over contents of Urdu and Islamiyat textbooks forced the closure of schools and it took more than a year to resolve the row and reopen the schools. Recent decades have thus witnessed many a sectarian clash and strife that have ominously resulted in loss of innocent lives.

Besides sectarian threats the locals perceive that their unique cultural and historical identities are also being threatened. Bhutto abolished the erstwhile princely states (vassals of former State of Jammu and Kashmir) between 1972 and 1974 and relieved the kings (Mirs) of most of their powers, and their kingdoms were incorporated into Pakistan. A deliberate attempt was made to erase old identities some of which were thousands of years old like in the case of Hunza. The State of Hunza, which had existed for centuries, was incorporated into Gilgit District to obliterate its historic past.

The region is inhabited by over one million ethnically distinct people of Turko-Mongoloid origin who have lived and practiced Buddhism and Islam in a manner distinct from the rest of Pakistan. The major languages spoken in the region - Shina, Domski, Brushaski, Wakhi, Khowar (all Dardic origin) and Balti (Tibetan origin), are linguistically quite distinct from all the other languages spoken in Pakistan. Abrogation of State Subject Rule and the construction of the Karakoram Highway in the 1980s, which connected this once inaccessible region to Pakistan and rest of the world, changed the profile of the region. Initially, it brought with it feelings of openness, connectivity, hope and business opportunities with China but it ushered in unprecedented socio-cultural and economic change in Gilgit and Baltistan. It also altered work patterns as well as the social, political and cultural landscape, and agricultural practices and worst of all, it also brought with it outsiders, who have managed to spread fanaticism in the area and change the unique culture of the region which was strongly steeped in its Buddhist past. Many residents complain that they were ill prepared to embrace the 'change', these outsiders wish to impose. Both Iranian Revolution and Talibanisation of Afghanistan have had deep impact in the region and have brought in clerics who are keen to establish their own brand of puritanical Islam in the region.

The impoverished population of the region believes that this growing fundamentalism threatens their unique ethno-cultural identity. The state has not taken any steps to promote the unique culture and languages spoken by different valleys in the region. As the number of people speaking different languages is rather small, the influx of outsiders threatens the very survival of these languages in the absence of suitable institutional support. These languages are hardly taught anywhere and it appears as if Pakistani state wants the unique cultural identity of this region to get subsumed within the overall Islamic identity of Pakistan. The people are therefore agitated as they feel that their rich cultural heritage will be lost forever. As a result the people in the region, especially in Baltistan have started attempts to re-establish links with all things Tibetan or Ladakhi, in a last-ditch attempt to

save their culture from total Iran-style Islamisation. They feel culture is more than a question of being Islamic and non-Islamic. They feel threatened from Pakistan's dominant Punjabi culture.

According to Syed Abbas Kazmi, who is in the forefront of this revival movement, "We have lost our link with the past. To wear our traditional woollen clothes or even to speak Balti is considered a sign of backwardness. We dress like and eat like the Punjabis even though many of their customs are just as foreign to us as those from the West." He has made attempts to protect the pre Islamic Buddhist architecture of the region. As part of this campaign to defend their culture, the people have started attempts to bring back Tibetan script as they feel that Arabic script is grossly inadequate to bring out the richness in their language. As part of this revival process Baltistan Students Federation has made the yung drung (swastika), the ancient Bon symbol of prosperity, as their logo.

Local scholars have taught themselves how to read the Tibetan script and have initiated a dialogue with their counterparts in Ladakh through internet. They research and publish mostly in Urdu, on topics ranging from the ancient Bon tradition to the Gesar epic. Though the Tibetan Buddhism and Bon were replaced over the course of centuries, the process of Islamisation has accelerated after the region came under Pakistani control especially after the Iranian revolution but the information age and current soul searching may help Baltistan embrace its ancient diversity. People have accordingly been demanding the opening of Kargil- Skardu bus service to revive their cultural links with Ladakh region especially Kargil and surrounding region. Ladakh and Baltistan share a common history, culture and natural heritage. In fact, prior to 1947, Baltistan was part of the Ladakh Wazarat. They feel that by not allowing the bus service Pakistan is probably preventing their attempts at cultural consolidation and development of cultural linkages across the line of control.

In order to preserve the unique identity of the region Dogra Maharajas had enacted a State Subject Rule, which barred outsiders from seeking permanent residence or naturalisation in the princely states. The law was also enacted to ensure that outsiders did not swamp the tiny local population. However, Bhutto removed it in the 1970s and opened the floodgates of immigration. Interestingly both in Jammu and Kashmir as well as in other areas of Pak occupied Kashmir the rule is still in force. This is one of the clearest manifestations of the intent of the Pakistani State to change the demographic profile of the region. The attempts by the successive Pakistani administrations to bring in people from various parts of Pakistan have created the fears of ethnic marginalisation in their own traditional homeland in the minds of Baltis and Dardic people. The murder of IG Police of the 'Northern Areas', Sakhiullah Tareen on March 23, 2005, the killing of Rangers'

personnel along with civilians on October 13 and the sectarian strife are all the different manifestations of the local vs. non-local confrontation. The local sects enjoyed a peaceful coexistence for many years. Things turned nasty with the ‘outsider’ Pakhtoons, Kashmiri and the jihadi elements coming into play in the area. The tragedy of the local administration in Gilgit and Baltistan is that it suffers from a total lack of trust from those living in the area. In any case, attempts to graft population in sensitive areas as insurance, is an exercise in futility, which only serves to alienate the local population and fuels rifts as are being witnessed now.

### **Conclusion**

The growing alienation of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan on the one hand has led to a demand from the Shia majority for autonomy with real executive and legislative powers, with radicals amongst them demanding self determination, Sunni minority on the other hand has called for a merger of the Gilgit-Baltistan with the so called ‘Azad Kashmir’, a demand which has been upheld by the judiciary of ‘Azad Kashmir’. However, an abyss already exists between the Shias and Sunnis, not only in Pakistan, but in the rest of the Muslim world too. Pakistan's political and religious collusion with Pan-Arab countries follows an anti-Iran and anti-Shia line. The Shias of POK (Pakistan Occupied Kashmir) are thus being deliberately discriminated against and denied their due share of funds for development. The Pakistan government, entangled in a web of its own inconsistencies fears the creation of a separate full-fledged Shia majority administrative region, which it perceives would have serious repercussions on Shia-Sunni relations in the rest of the country. It is estimated that over 1000 lives have been lost, since the sectarian conflicts surfaced in this region in 1988.

Right from the beginning Pakistan has been wary of the Shia dominated population of the region and has made all attempts at marginalising them in the region. Rather than looking into the legitimate grievances of the local population, Pakistan went in for the right-wing solution of diluting the Shia population and ‘solving’ the problem once and for all. This has created a sectarian tinderbox in Gilgit and Baltistan. This sectarian and ethnic marginalisation coupled with lack of constitutional rights has resulted in violent protests. The sectarian violence has been a regular feature of the region since 1988, when many people living in Shia-dominated villages in the area were killed by tribesmen from outside. Of late, the targeted killing of high-profile personalities in the area, violent demonstrations against law enforcement agencies, discord over educational material and frequent curfews and the closure of schools have led to a volatile situation. This has been aggravated by overall

poverty, decline in businesses and the general lack of educational and employment opportunities for disgruntled youth. Politically, too, the people in Gilgit and Baltistan are unhappy with their constitutional status the NALC has few powers and remains a toothless body, especially when compared with the military and civil bureaucracy.

Besides growing sectarianism and lack of constitutional rights, the economic deprivation, cultural marginalisation and lack of representation in government are the other underlying reasons behind the alienation of population in this sensitive region. The construction of Bhasha dam will inundate large tracts of land and bring in settlers from outside the region, who are bound to disturb the delicate sectarian balance. In the absence of any suitable legislative forum to express this resentment, the populace of Gilgit-Baltistan has been resorting to gun barrel to exhibit their discontentment. The potentially tumultuous region needs to be watched carefully, as developments in the region will have ramifications on the discussions to resolve the Kashmir dispute.

The region is legally the part of India and the Indian government has of late started voicing its concern on the denial of constitutional rights to the people of the region. The alienation of the population in this crucial region provides India a crucial leverage against Pakistan and diminishes the importance of valley based groups. The demand by the people of Baltistan to open a bus link between Kargil and Skardu must be encouraged as it will reunite families divided for 65 years, and expose the people of this deprived region to the constitutional rights and autonomy being enjoyed by the people of Kargil and Ladakh.

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