

Gilgit-Baltistan An Appraisal

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Gilgit-Baltistan An Appraisal

Introduction

Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK) has been in tumult; the frozen heights of the Karakoram have become an arena for violent clashes. The region was annexed by Pakistan during the tumultuous era of 1947-48, when the erstwhile Princely State of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) acceded to India. This strategically located, resource-rich region is amongst the most impoverished regions in entire South Asia. The people of the region have, by and large, been deprived of any say in their governance. The unique culture and distinctive languages of the region have been under continuous threat from the rising influx of outsiders, facilitated in many cases with the connivance of the Pakistani authorities. Constitutionally an Indian territory, the region has become an arena for frequent protests by the impoverished population, which has occasionally turned violent. As most of the inhabitants of the region adhere to the Shiite school of thought, this discontent has acquired a distinctive sectarian undertone, as the rest of Pakistan is Sunni-majority. Despite comprising over 80 per cent of the area of the former princely state under Pakistani occupation, there has been general ignorance about the region in the world at large, and in India in particular.

In the recent past, reports of large scale Chinese presence, including members of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), in this strategically significant region have raised some concerns in the West, as well as in India. However, by and large, it has not attracted the requisite interest of the Indian policy-makers, academic scholars, media or the general public in India. In the Indian academic circles, adequate research has not been done on the developments in the region since 1947. The Indian media also covers the region quite rarely and, as such, events in this part have largely remained shrouded in mystery. In the last decade, there has been considerable disenchantment here against Pakistan as the region, by and large, has remained unrepresented and the people denied their political rights. Of late, the Pakistan government has

taken some steps to grant the region a modicum of participative democracy. Despite these attempts by Islamabad to assuage the decades-old grievances of the population, the alienation of the people in Gilgit-Baltistan has been increasing as their primary concerns have not yet been addressed. As a result, the symbols of the Pakistani state in the region, including the security forces, have been regularly targeted.

The region was annexed by Pakistan during the tumultuous era of 1947-48, when the then princely state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) acceded to India. It came under Pakistani control, when the British Commander of the Gilgit Scouts, Major Brown declared accession to Pakistan on 04 November 1947.¹ The region was named “The Northern Areas of Pakistan” and placed under the direct control of Islamabad, separate from the Pakistan-Administered “Azad (Independent) Kashmir”. Unlike Pakistan’s four provinces, the region has no political representation in the parliament or the federal cabinet and no status under Pakistan’s constitution. Till the recent cosmetic exercise implemented by the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) government, the region was directly administered by Islamabad through a non-elected Federal Minister for Northern Areas. This is quite different from the other parts of PoK called ‘Azad Kashmir’ which has always had a modicum of self-governance. The people of the region also do not have any redressal available to them under the Pakistani legal system.

Since 1948, there has been continuous jostling over the ownership of this strategically significant region amongst various ethnic and sectarian groups that are indigenous to the region, as well as those that have been brought in by various Pakistani regimes from outside. In the recent past, there has been a serious sectarian divide and there have been numerous reports of mass persecution of people following different strands of Shiaism. In 2004-05, the schools in the region remained closed for almost a year as 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 police personnel and government officials. These are nothing but manifestations of the people’s increasing alienation with the government. There have been statements by the members of the Gilgit-Baltistan United Movement, wherein they have not only accused the Indian government of not doing enough for them but have also demanded reservations in Indian

educational institutions for the residents of Gilgit and Baltistan.² These statements not only show the level of the alienation of the people of this region with Pakistan, but also their expectations from India. Even in the aftermath of the earthquake in October 2005, when in the face of a severe natural calamity, there was a surge of Pakistani nationalism and the entire Pakistani nation had supposedly come together to face the natural disaster, there were riots in Gilgit-Baltistan and curfew had to be imposed in most towns of the region.

This paper attempts to bridge the knowledge gap that exists on this region. It examines the historical linkages of the region with the rest of Jammu and Kashmir and India, analyses the events of 1947-48 that led to the annexation of this strategic region by Pakistan, studies the developments in the region since its occupation by Pakistan, looks at the causes of alienation of the region's population, what are the external interests in this region, and evaluates its geo-political implications for the entire region, including India and Pakistan. The developments in the region have been studied in the historical context. Also, the recent acts of violence, and the factors precipitating violence and implications for India have been analysed.

Historical Background

Historically, Gilgit-Baltistan evolved as two separate political entities, namely, Dardistan or Gilgit and Baltistan, though there were times when they were part of the same political entity. The two political entities were eventually united during the Sikh rule and remained so during the subsequent Dogra rule.

Gilgit: The Early History

Gilgit, also known as Dardistan, is the land of the Dards or Dardic speaking people, belonging to the Indo-Aryan family of languages. On account of its strategic location, this region has always been coveted by different kingdoms on its borders.³ The early history of the Dards has remained shrouded. They are known to have had some association with the prehistoric social groups of the Shin and Yashkun. Their appearance in history has been linked to the movements and migration of the Achamenians, Scythians, Kushanas, Sassanians and Huns.⁴ The region was part of the Mauryan Empire, with

Ashoka's fourteen rock edicts still surviving along the Karakoram Highway.⁵ The early Buddhist records clearly indicate that the entire Kashmir Valley and Gilgit-Baltistan were parts of the wider dominions of the great Kushan Empire. This has been further substantiated by the various Kanishka and Huvishka coins and copper pieces that have been found extensively at various sites in Kashmir.⁶ Subsequently, in the early 6th century, the Huns conquered the region. In 530 CE, Kashmir became part of the Empire of Ujjain in Central India but when Ujjain's power declined, Kashmir gained independence.⁷ During the subsequent period, when a number of Hindu kings ruled Kashmir, almost all the present-day parts of the state of Jammu and Kashmir were under the same rule. Under Lalitaditya (724-761 CE) and the Karkota kings who followed him, Gilgit-Baltistan, along with all the other regions of Jammu and Kashmir state as it existed under the Dogra empire, were integral parts of the Kashmir empire. Not only that, Lalitaditya's Empire extended all the way down to South India, thereby establishing Kashmir's close historical ties with the rest of India. However, as in other parts of India, whenever the central leadership in Kashmir was weak, the peripheral regions attained independence.⁸

Thereafter, even during the Muslim period, close relations were maintained by the rulers in Kashmir Valley with Dardistan, Baltistan, Ladakh and Jammu and all other peripheral regions of the state. In fact, Rinchin (1320-1323 CE), the first Muslim King of Kashmir, was a prince of Ladakh. Sultan Shihab-ud-din, who is said to be the "Lalitaditya of medieval Kashmir," not only ruled over entire present-day Jammu and Kashmir but also extended his empire all the way to the banks of Sutlej. Throughout the period of the Delhi Sultanate, there was constant interaction amongst the people of various parts of Kashmir. In fact, the interaction of Kashmir with Dardistan, Baltistan, Ladakh and Jammu continued unabated during this period and the rulers of the last major independent Muslim dynasty that ruled Kashmir – the Chak dynasty – had, in fact, migrated from Gilgit.⁹

Baltistan

Baltistan, the land of the Balti people, was well known as *Tibet-i-Khurd* or "Little Tibet" in the medieval literature. The early history of Baltistan began with the spread of Buddhism under the Kushanas. The region was part of

Lalitaditya's Empire in the 8th century CE and had close interactions with Gilgit and Kashmir. A large number of immigrants from Kashmir and other areas migrated to Baltistan and even ruled the state. In the beginning of the 13th century, an adventurer, Ibrahim Shah, founded the Makpon dynasty in Baltistan. Some historians consider Ibrahim to be a Kashmiri, while others trace his origins to Egypt. Ibrahim married a local princess and laid the foundation of a new dynasty. Around the 15th century, when Skardu was ruled by Makpon Bokha, a Muslim missionary, Mir Shamsuddin Iraqi, is believed to have reached Baltistan to spread Islam. Other historians believe that Mohammed Nur Bakhsh, the founder of the Nurbakhshi order (Molai sect) came to Baltistan to spread Islam in 1488 CE.

The Balti state fought a number of wars with its neighbouring states. Towards the end of the 15th century, the boundary between Baltistan and Ladakh was fixed by Ali Sher Khan who was then the ruler of the Balti state. Ali Sher Khan later extended his rule up to Dardistan by defeating the kings of Gilgit and Chitral. His successors, however, fought amongst themselves and with the other neighbouring states until the Balti state fell under the suzerainty of the Mughal Empire.¹⁰

Mughal Rule

With the ascension of the Mughals, Kashmir came under the Mughal rule. On 28 June 1586, Mughal Emperor Akbar dispatched an Army, which conquered Kashmir in July 1589. He built the famous Mughal Road and visited Kashmir thrice during his reign.¹¹ Akbar also captured parts of Baltistan and Ladakh and as a marriage of alliance, a Princess of Baltistan was married to Prince Salim, son of Emperor Akbar. Around 1600 CE, Mughal armies attacked Ali Sher Khan the Crown Prince of Baltistan, who fled to the high mountains without a fight.¹² In 1634, Emperor Shahjahan captured Ladakh, Baltistan and Kishtawar and made them a part of the Kashmir province.¹³

After the death of Ali Sher Khan, the King of Skardu, Adam Khan, his eldest son, sought Mughal help against his brother Abdal Khan to ascend the throne. After seizing the throne as a vassal of the Mughal Emperor, Adam Khan initially resided at the Mughal court in Delhi and subsequently in Kashmir. A Viceroy appointed by him governed Baltistan on his behalf. After his death, his son-in-law and Viceroy, Murad Khan was declared the ruler by

Shahjahan.¹⁴ The Mughal rule continued till 1753, after which the Afghan rule took over. During this period, all parts of the state of Jammu and Kashmir barring Gilgit and surrounding areas were under Mughal suzerainty and even the small kingdom of Dardistan around Gilgit had continuous interaction with the rulers of Baltistan and Kashmir. Murad Khan, ruler of Skardu and a vassal of the Mughal Emperor, married his daughter to the son of the Raja of Gilgit and captured Gilgit after his son-in-law was murdered. He subsequently appointed a Viceroy to rule Gilgit on his behalf.¹⁵

Mughal Emperors visited Kashmir on a number of occasions and built many monuments. As Delhi remained the final seat of power, this period saw further increase in the interaction between various parts of the state of Jammu and Kashmir and the rest of India. Close political, cultural, social and economic links were established between Baltistan, Kashmir and other parts of India. This era saw Baltistan acquire a lot of influence from other parts of India. A large number of artisans from various parts of India were brought in and settled in Skardu by Shah Murad. These included cobblers, jewellers, masons and stone-cutters, who introduced the use of marble in the region.¹⁶

With the weakening of the Mughal Empire, Kashmir came to be ruled by Afghan kings for around six decades. As Mughal rule disappeared from Kashmir Valley, the rulers in Baltistan attempted to break free of the Kashmiri domination. This resulted in an attack on Skardu by Haji Karim, the Afghan Governor of Kashmir. His General, Murtaza Khan defeated the ruler of Skardu in 1779 and reestablished Kashmir's control over Baltistan.¹⁷ Afghan rule over Kashmir was extremely oppressive and with the rise of Sikh power in Punjab, the people of Kashmir led by Birbal Dhar requested Maharaja Ranjit Singh to invade Kashmir and even offered to pay the expenses for the invasion. Maharaja Ranjit Singh himself led a force of 30,000 troops and captured Kashmir Valley on 15 June 1819.¹⁸

Consequently, control over Kashmir passed from the Afghans to the Sikhs. During Afghan rule, the central authority over the peripheral regions of the state had eroded and, thus, the Sikh rule was initially confined to Srinagar and the surrounding Kashmir Valley, whereas the Jammu region was given to his Dogra Minister, Raja Gulab Singh, as a *jagir* by Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1820.¹⁹ Subsequently, the Raja of Skardu was subjugated and forced to pay homage to Maharaja Ranjit Singh. His Governor at Srinagar, Sher Singh

also controlled Kohistan and Astor in Dardistan, where there was a vast mine of gem stones.²⁰ After consolidating his position in the Jammu region, Gulab Singh captured Ladakh in 1836, with Ranjit Singh's permission.²¹ By this time, palace intrigues in Baltistan forced Muhammad Shah, one of the claimants to the throne to seek help from Maharaja Ranjit Singh, who, in turn, directed him to Gulab Singh at Jammu. Gulab Singh sent him to his General, Zorawar Singh, who was on his way to Ladakh. After capturing Ladakh, Zorawar Singh captured Baltistan in 1840 and appointed Muhammad Shah as the ruler of Baltistan (as a vassal of Gulab Singh).²² Meanwhile, Gilgit and the surrounding areas of Dardistan were captured by Colonel Nathe Shah in 1842, Commander of Sheikh Ghulam Mohi-ud-din, Maharaja Ranjit Singh's Governor of Kashmir.²³

Raja Ali Sher Khan, the ruler of Kharmang, a tiny principality in Baltistan, in his autobiography has clearly articulated his assistance to General Zorawar Singh in his campaign against Skardu, his assistance to Colonel Nathe Shah in his campaign against various rulers in Gilgit and eventually his assistance to Maharaja Gulab Singh in his final offensive to capture Srinagar from Sheikh Imamuddin, the Governor appointed by Lahore. These associations clearly indicate that there were close linkages among Jammu, Baltistan, Gilgit and Kashmir, in that period.²⁴

Consolidation Under Dogra Rule

After the defeat of the Sikh Army at Subraon on 10 February 1846, the Treaty of Lahore was signed on 09 March 1846. This treaty forced the Sikhs to cede to the British all territories between the Beas and the Sutlej and to pay Rs one crore as war indemnity. Lal Singh, the then Prime Minister of the Sikhs, offered all the hill territories of the Kingdom, including Jammu and Kashmir, in lieu of the indemnity. The British then offered to make Gulab Singh the Dogra ruler of Jammu, the independent ruler of entire Jammu and Kashmir provided he paid the indemnity amount. The amount was reduced to Rs 75 lakh as the British decided to keep the territory between the Ravi and the Beas which included Kangra.²⁵ Accordingly, the Treaty of Amritsar was signed, which formalised the creation of a new state of Jammu and Kashmir. The British government having "transferred and made over for ever in independent possession" to "Raja Mian Gulab

Singh and heirs male of his body, the territory” which included Kashmir and Jammu.²⁶ This treaty made Gulab Singh the absolute ruler of Kashmir; he was named the “Maharaja of Kashmir”, and in the process, became a full-fledged sovereign of the regions of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh, as well as Gilgit, Chilas and Baltistan, the region, which till recently was called ‘Northern Areas’ of Pakistan.²⁷

Even though the British had accepted Gulab Singh’s undisputed control over Kashmir, the developments in Central Asia and other parts of India compelled the British to interfere in the region. After the 1857 Mutiny, the British contemplated military occupation of Kashmir, but by the 1860s, alarmed by the growing Russian presence in Central Asia, they cajoled the Maharaja to bring Chitral and Yasin under his control to prevent Russian influence. The Gilgit Agency was established in 1877 with Major John Biddulph as the first Political Agent. The Agent was withdrawn in 1881 but was reappointed in 1889 in view of the growing Afghan influence in Chitral as well as due to the Russian military activities in Central Asia.²⁸ Meanwhile, the *Mehtar* (ruler) of Chitral accepted the Dogra suzerainty in 1878 and started paying tribute every third year to the Dogras.²⁹

Consequent to the Russian revolution, the British anxieties over the region increased and the Maharaja was forced to lease the Gilgit Agency to the British for 60 years on 26 March 1935. The agreement gave the Viceroy the right to assume civil and military administration of the *Wazarat* of Gilgit province that lay beyond the right bank of the river Indus. The Maharaja was in no position to resist the British pressure,³⁰ because of which, despite being a part of the Maharaja’s territory, Gilgit and the surrounding regions of Dardistan, including the vassal states, were virtually administered by the British directly, from 1935 to 1947. Though a modicum of the Maharaja’s authority was maintained by way of flying his flag at the official headquarters of the Agency and by way of appointment of certain state officials in Gilgit, the only real authority with the Maharaja was to grant mining licences and leases.³¹ However, all the area to the left of the river Indus in Dardistan and the entire Baltistan remained under the direct control of the Maharaja. With the announcement of independence in 1947, the British were compelled to hand over Gilgit Agency back to the Maharaja.

Post Colonial Era

As the British set sail from the Indian shores, the British Indian government decided to hand over the administrative control of all areas of Gilgit Agency, including Hunza, to the Kashmir state government with effect from 01 August 1947.³² Accordingly, Brigadier Ghansara Singh was appointed by the Maharaja as the Governor of these areas on 19 July 1947. He arrived in Gilgit on 30 July 1947, along with General Scott, the Chief of Staff of the Kashmir State Forces. During their meeting with Major Brown, the Commandant of the Gilgit Scouts, Subedar Major Babar Khan and the other Junior Commissioned Officers (JCOs), both the Governor and Chief of Staff were assured by the Scouts that they would serve the state if their demands regarding the service conditions were accepted.³³

However, when Ghansara Singh took over the administration from Lieutenant Colonel Beacon, the Political Agent, on 01 August 1947, the entire office work of the administration came to a grinding halt as all the British officers had opted for Pakistan and no replacements from the state had been positioned there. The civil establishment in Gilgit refused to serve till they were guaranteed higher rates of pay. To compound matters, all the controlled stores had been spent or distributed and not even an ounce of sugar or a yard of cloth was left in the stores. General Scott returned to Srinagar on 02 August 1947 with a promise to get some assistance.³⁴

For the next three months, the Governor was a lame duck: he sent letters and telegrams to the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary at Srinagar informing them about the state of affairs in Gilgit and surrounding areas. However, palace intrigues at Srinagar ensured that such correspondence rarely fetched a reply and, accordingly, no tangible help came from Srinagar to cement the Maharaja's administration in Gilgit. Even General Scott's attempts to highlight the situation in Gilgit fell on deaf ears. It seems as if the Maharaja's administration was too preoccupied by internal intrigues and the problems in Poonch and the Valley to think about a far-flung region. Militarily, no attempts were made to significantly consolidate the Maharaja's hold in Gilgit Agency. One company of 5th Kashmir Light Infantry (KLI), commanded by Captain Durga Singh and located at Bunji, 34 miles short of Gilgit, was replaced by 6th KLI comprising two companies each of Sikh and Muslim troops and led by Lieutenant Colonel Abdul Majeed Khan. At Gilgit, 500

troops of Gilgit Scouts were being commanded by Major Brown, who, along with Captain Matheson, had agreed to serve the state. Two other Muslim officers of the Kashmir State Army had been deputed to serve under him. Some Muslim officers of the 6th KLI had established contact with the Muslim officers and JCOs of Gilgit Scouts with the aim of establishing Pakistan's rule in Gilgit.³⁵

After Pakistan invaded Jammu and Kashmir, the Maharaja fled Srinagar for Jammu and acceded to India, resulting in pandemonium in Gilgit. Rumours were floated that Srinagar had fallen and in the early hours of 01 November 1947, the Governor's house was surrounded by about 100 troops, asking him to surrender. The Governor surrendered ostensibly with a view to protect the lives of the non-Muslim residents. His surrender, however, led to the disintegration of 6th KLI at Bunji, with troops killing each other. All the Sikh troops were either killed or fled to the mountains to save their lives.³⁶ After the Governor's arrest, a provisional government of the 'People's Republic of Gilgit and Baltistan' was set up.³⁷ It was headed by one local Rais Khan and included Major Brown, Captain Ihsan Ali, Captain Hassan (both of the State Forces), Captain Sayeed, Lieutenant Haider, Subedar Major Babar Khan (all three from Gilgit Scouts) and Wazir Wilayat Ali. On 04 November 1947, the Pakistani flag was hoisted at the Gilgit Scouts lines by Major Brown.³⁸ Brown described his action as a *coup d'etat* and informed Peshawar about it. Sir George Cunningham, the new Governor of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) instructed him to restore order.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰

The role of the Gilgit Scouts and its Commander Major Brown in the developments of 1947 is often exaggerated by the scholars of both India and Pakistan. It suited both Indian and Pakistani historians to assign him preeminence in the events that took place in Gilgit. For the Pakistanis, it was essential to show that the Gilgit Scouts were leading the rebellion to portray it as indigenous. Their narrative advocated that Major Brown was moved to action by his troops, local inhabitants, who strongly favoured joining Pakistan. From India's point of view, his involvement indicated British complicity and supported various conspiracy theories. Major Brown subsequently claimed credit for bringing the region into the Pakistani fold and was posthumously

awarded the Star of Pakistan. However, a careful analysis will indicate that he joined the rebels as a last resort. He and Matheson had agreed to serve the State Army and were responsible to the Governor. Brown presented daily situation reports to the Governor and took steps to prevent the rebellion and disperse the rebel elements.⁴¹ He also tried to protect the lives of the non-Muslim population and was arrested twice by the rebels in the initial days of the rebellion but, subsequently, he not only reestablished his authority, but also claimed credit for transferring the region to Pakistan.

It must be appreciated that the Gilgit Scouts was not a homogenous force. The different platoons were formed by men from different principalities in the region and owed their allegiance to their rulers, who continued to profess their loyalty to the Maharaja till the very end. In fact, “the Raja of Puniyal even came to defend Brigadier Ghansara Singh with his bodyguards,” when Ghansara Singh was subsequently attacked.⁴² Besides, there were serious differences along sectarian and ethnic lines amongst the troops of the Gilgit Scouts. Moreover, they were lightly armed and incapable of taking on the State Forces, who were better armed. Their apolitical nature is clearly evident from their 12-point charter of demands submitted to Brigadier Ghansara Singh. They related only to pay and service conditions and did not talk about Pakistan or any other religious factor.⁴³ It is obvious that if they had intended to revolt in three months’ time, they would not have demanded long-term benefits like pensions and gratuities. Moreover, the Gilgit Scouts as well as local population at that time were “free from the violent communal passions that were sweeping through Punjab.”⁴⁴ This was probably the main reason why the Governor chose the Gilgit Scouts over the Muslim troops of the 6th KLI to defend Gilgit. Most of the Scouts were sitting on the fence and joined the rebels only after they were led to believe that Srinagar had fallen to the tribal raiders.

After capturing Dardistan, the invasion of Baltistan started, which was led by Captain Ihsan Ali and included troops from the 6th KLI, Gilgit Scouts and about 1,200 combatants from Chitral sent by the *Mehtar* of Chitral.⁴⁵ The State Forces led by Colonel Sher Jung Thapa defended Skardu gallantly for over six months, despite being totally cut off from rest of the Indian forces. However, the rebels, supported by the Pakistani forces, captured Zojila Pass in May 1948 and infiltrated through Drass, Kargil, and other points to

threaten Leh. The Indian Army had to subsequently use tanks to clear them from Zojila and defend Leh.⁴⁶ Despite heroic resistance put up by Thapa and his troops, the Indian armed forces could not relieve Skardu and assist the garrison there. The Army's efforts to link up with the garrison were foiled by infiltrators who ambushed the two platoons of Gorkha troops that had been sent to relieve the garrison at Skardu; the Air Force for some inexplicable reasons was reluctant to undertake supply missions to Skardu by Dakotas⁴⁷, although they undertook far more risky operations during the war. The Air Force did airdrop some supplies but they fell far short of the minimum needs of the besieged garrison and the non-Muslim population that had taken refuge in the cantonment.⁴⁸ Consequently, Skardu garrison, led by Thapa, surrendered on 14 August 1948, and control over Baltistan and surrounding areas passed on to Pakistan.⁴⁹

The Land and the People

Gilgit-Baltistan is a sparsely populated mountainous region, which covers an area of 72,971 sq km, which makes it more than six times the size of 'Azad Kashmir'.⁵⁰ The mountainous region is divided into Gilgit and Baltistan Divisions, which are further sub-divided into seven districts. Gilgit, Diamer, Ghizer, Hunza-Nagar and Astore comprise Gilgit Division, whereas Skardu and Ghanche comprise Baltistan Division. With the Karakoram, Himalaya and Hindukush ranges as a backdrop, the region shares borders with China's Uyghur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang, Wakhan corridor of Afghanistan and Chitral district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), besides other parts of former J&K state. Chitral, incidentally, was under the suzerainty of Kashmir state, like Hunza and Nagar, the other vassal states in Gilgit-Baltistan. It has historical and cultural linkages with it and should have been a part of Gilgit-Baltistan.⁵¹

The region contains the eight highest peaks apart from Mount Everest and Kanchanjunga and has over 50 peaks of more than 7,000 m height. It has snow-clad peaks, mighty glaciers and narrow lush green valleys with heights varying from 3,000 ft to 28,250 ft above sea level.⁵² The region is also home to three of the world's longest glaciers outside the Polar region, namely the Biafo Glacier, Baltoro Glacier and Batura Glacier. There are numerous high altitude lakes in the region. Most of the fresh water supplies of Pakistan

originate in the region or pass through it. The region is home to the second highest plateau in the world, the Deosai Plains, covering an area of over 5,000 sq km at an altitude of 4,115 m and is snow-bound between September and May. The village of Deosai is connected to Kargil by an all weather road.⁵³

Climatically, the region is quite diverse. The presence of high mountains which separate different valleys, create rain shadows and sharp differences in weather pattern and temperature. The towns like Gilgit and Chilas are quite hot during the day in the summer, but cold at night, whereas valleys like Astore, Khaplu, Yasin, Hunza and Nagar remain cold, even during the summer. Generally, the climate is extremely cold in the winter and temperate in the summer. The eastern part belongs to the moist zone of the Western Himalayas but as one moves towards the Karakoram and Hindukush ranges, the climate becomes drier. The precipitation, by and large, varies with altitude, the valleys are generally dry with annual precipitation around 200 mm but as one moves higher, the precipitation increases, and at altitudes of 13,000 ft, it is as high as 600 mm. Studies of the glaciers indicate that above 16,000 ft, precipitation in the form of snow is of the order of 2,000 mm, annually. Most of the valleys have desert-like conditions with no scope for rain-fed agriculture, while numerous glaciers form and accumulate in the higher reaches of the mountains. The maximum temperature is generally experienced in the valleys in the months of July or August and averages 20 to 25° C, although there have been instances when temperatures as high as 40° C have been recorded. The minimum temperatures in the valleys are experienced in January and are generally between -10° C to 0° C.⁵⁴

Population

The population of the region comprises numerous ethnic groups and tribes and is believed to have grown by 63.1 per cent from 883,799 in 1998 to 1,441,523 in 2011, whereas the households have increased by 49.9 per cent from 109,318 to 163,887 during this period, according to the preliminary results of house listing as part of the 2011 Census of Pakistan. According to break-up figures, the highest, 119 percent, increase in population was witnessed in Diamir district where the number of people went up from 135,062 to 295,831 followed by Gilgit where the population increased 76.6 per cent from 148,040 to 261,440. Similarly, the highest increase in

households was witnessed in Diamir and Gilgit districts. According to the preliminary data, both population growth and the growth of households since 1998 have averaged 3.81 in Gilgit Baltistan. In terms of percentage growth in districts, in Baltistan, the growth rate stood at 3.83, in Diamir at 6.18, in Ghanche 4.04, Ghizer 2.51, Gilgit, 4.44, Astore 2.12, while the growth rate in Hunza Nagar was recorded at 2.28.⁵⁵

The population in entire Gilgit-Baltistan follows Islam, but the harbingers of faith came from different directions at different points of time, hence, there are significant differences in beliefs, which also incorporate many that existed prior to the advent of Islam. In Dardistan, in the northwestern region, including Hunza Valley, the population adheres to the Ismaili beliefs, whereas in Nagar and the eastern part of Gilgit, people follow 'Twelver Shiaism (*Ithna Ashariyyah*)' Islam. Shinkari in the south was conquered later by the Islamic invaders from Swat and the people accordingly follow Sunni beliefs. They have to a great extent come under the Pakhtoon influence. Shins still follow many of their ancient customs and festivals, although they have lost their original fervour under pressure from the *mullahs*. People, especially in the countryside, still believe in the stories of fairies and witches. The traditional "Shin taboo," of not touching any part of a cow or consuming dairy products or beef has diminished significantly under Islamic influence but is still observed by a few individuals, especially when ritualistic purity is considered necessary.⁵⁶ In Baltistan, most of the people are adherents of Twelver Shiaism (*Ithna Ashariyyah*), while some belong to the Moloi or Nurbakhshi sect.⁵⁷ Nurbakhshis consider themselves to be distinct from both Shias and Sunnis. They reside in the northern and northeastern parts of Baltistan, whereas the followers of 'Twelver Shiaism' are predominant in the central, southern and western parts of Baltistan.⁵⁸

Resources

The region is rich in mineral resources, with abundance of a number of precious metals and important radioactive material. It has huge reserves of gold – there are numerous gold mines, especially in Bhasha, Braldo, Parkuta, Saltoro and in the rivers Shigar, Indus and Shyok. Good quality marble is mined in Kwardo, near Skardu, whereas black marble is found in Gulabpur and Chotron. In fact, the entire region, Kwardo to Bhasha, is full of marble. In Wasoned in Shigar

Valley, emerald is mined and a mica mine exists near Nyaslo stream in the Bhasha Valley. Copper sulphate is mined in Chorbat. There are iron mines in Nend in Shigar and Chotron in Braldo, whereas lead is mined in Pharda in Khapulu and Daso in Shigar. Antimony is found in the area of Stak in Rondu and alum is found in Ghowari stream and in Ashkopo.⁵⁹ In addition, the region has mines of uranium 238, ruby, topaz, quartz, iron, sulphur and oil.⁶⁰

The economy in Dardistan is based on agriculture in irrigated terraced fields and rearing of animal herds on high mountain pastures in the summer and stall feeding in the winter. The main crops are maize, wheat and barley, although some rice is also cultivated at the bottom of some valleys. Millets, lentils and certain kinds of beans are sowed in the middle and higher fields, while buckwheat is cultivated in the highest fields. Mulberries, apricots, grapes and other dried nuts are popular fruits, whereas peaches, cherries, apples and figs are grown in regions which have regular contact with the outside world, The local population grows very few green vegetables due to the climatic conditions.⁶¹

Baltistan, on the other hand, is a desert like Ladakh, with hardly any precipitation, as a result of which no agriculture is possible here, without irrigation. However, Baltistan is at a lower altitude with respect to Ladakh and is, therefore, slightly warmer; it also receives scattered snow and rainfall in some places. The valleys of the Shyok River and Indus River are under cultivation. The *rabi* crops sown here are wheat, gram, peas, pulses, beans and rapeseed. During the *kharif* season, millet, buckwheat and coarse grains are grown. Rice and maize are not grown and attempts to introduce them have not been successful due to the climatic conditions of the region. Good quality vegetables are grown, which include spinach, turnips, chillies, horseradishes, carrots, onions, cauliflowers and potato. Watermelons, melons and cantaloupes are available in abundance. The mild climate supports the growth of fruits such as mulberries, apricots, plums, peaches, apples, pears, grapes, redcurrants and walnuts. Almonds introduced during the Dogra rule, also grow well in the region, but are not very popular. Pomegranates are grown in the lower regions. There is hardly any industry in the region, but some woollen shawls and garments are manufactured in parts of Baltistan. A large quantity of apricots and their kernels are exported. By and large, the people are poor, as compared to Kargil and Ladakh.⁶²

Geo-politically, it is one of the most sensitive areas for Pakistan and has assumed additional political and strategic importance with the opening of the Karakoram Highway,⁶³ which links China to Pakistan and reportedly generates trade worth billions of dollars for Pakistan. The region was a popular tourist destination which provided a major source of employment in the region. However, this was adversely affected when Pakistan went nuclear in 1998, as the explosions mixed with the aftermath of 9/11 have almost dried up this avenue. Despite large-scale publicity, only 4,000 foreign tourists arrived for the 'K2' Golden Jubilee celebrations in 2004.⁶⁴ The resultant unemployment and lack of opportunities have created an explosive situation, leading to widespread unrest and frustration amongst the masses.⁶⁵

Despite being rain deficit, the region has enormous water resources as almost all the peaks are covered with heavy snow in the winter. Water flows in the summer due to the melting of the mighty glaciers. Less than 10 percent of the hydroelectric potential of the region has been tapped for local use.⁶⁶ This especially is ironic as Pakistan intends to build mega dams at Skardu and Bhasha which will inundate millions of acres of populated fertile lands to provide cheap electricity to the rest of Pakistan.

Gilgit-Baltistan Under Pakistani Control

The Pakistani authorities in Peshawar sent Sardar Mohammad Alam as Pakistan's first Political Agent to the region, and he arrived in Gilgit on 16 November 1947.⁶⁷ The accession was formalised by signing an agreement between the Presidents of 'Azad Kashmir' and the Muslim Conference on 28 April 1949. The agreement legitimised Pakistan's administrative control over the 'Northern Areas.'⁶⁸ Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan decided not to introduce democratic structures in Gilgit-Baltistan, but recommended that it should be directly controlled by the Ministry of Kashmir Affairs from Karachi.⁶⁹ In 1952, the Joint Secretary in the ministry was made the ex-officio Resident of the 'Northern Areas'. In 1967, a separate post of Resident, based at Gilgit was created. Though the 1949 agreement lapsed after the promulgation of the 1970 Act by President Yahya Khan, Pakistan has refused to return the areas to 'Azad Kashmir' despite court rulings to the contrary. The Frontier Crimes Regulations (FCR) introduced by the British, which treated tribesmen as barbaric and uncivilised, and levied collective fines and

punishments, were retained in Gilgit-Baltistan.⁷⁰ In 1963, Pakistan gave away 2,500 square miles of the territory of the former state of Hunza to China as part of the Sino-Pak Agreement, despite opposition by the Mir of Hunza.⁷¹

The region has never been represented in the Pakistani Parliament or in the 'Azad Kashmir Assembly'. In 1970, an Advisory Council with 14 elected members was set up, which was subsequently converted into the Northern Areas Council in 1975, but continued without any legislative or executive powers and was presided over by the Administrator appointed by Islamabad. In 1999, it was expanded and renamed the 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 the first NALC from 1999 to 2004, it failed to legislate on any subject. It did pass 18 resolutions recommending issues of public interest to the Ministry of Kashmir Affairs and Northern Areas (KANA), but none of these was executed.⁷²

Sectarian Violence

The attempts by President Zia-ul-Haq to introduce 'Sunni-Deobandi' Islam in the region exacerbated the alienation in the region. Consequently, Sunni Deobandi militant groups like the 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.⁷³ The popular perception that the local administration was biased towards Sunni extremists led to the first major violent demonstration by the Shias in Gilgit, in May 1988. In retaliation, Sunni hordes, often in connivance with the state, descended from outside the region and destroyed crops and houses, lynched and burnt hundreds of people to death.⁷⁴ Since then, sectarian riots have become a regular feature. The pattern shows that whenever the populace demanded their constitutional rights, there were riots.

On Zia's death anniversary on 17 August 1993, there were massive riots in Gilgit-Baltistan and over 20 people were killed before the situation was brought under control by the Army. The Army, in turn, accused the Shias of amassing weapons in their mosques, brought in from Iran. After which, persecution of the Shias followed and many of them were arrested.⁷⁵ During 2003-04, the Shias objected to certain contents in the Islamiyat and Urdu school text-books, forcing the authorities to close all the schools for one

full year till April 2005. The schools could be reopened only after all the controversial portions were removed to the satisfaction of all sects.⁷⁶ Imam Aga Syed Ziauddin Rizvi the local Shia cleric, helped the authorities in trying to resolve the issue to the satisfaction of the Shias.⁷⁷

Aga Ziauddin's Assassination and its Aftermath

The Sunni radicals were quite unhappy with the accommodation of the Shia viewpoint, which resulted in the assassination of the widely respected Shia cleric, Aga Ziauddin. On 08 January 2005, Aga Ziauddin was critically injured when gunmen opened fire on his car in Gilgit and five days, later he succumbed to his wounds at the Combined Military Hospital, Rawalpindi. His death caused mass rage amongst his supporters, which resulted in large scale violence in the region where many government buildings were set on fire and a number of officials and their families were attacked. As a result, curfew had to be imposed and troops were deployed to restore law and order. The region continued to simmer after the incident with a number of towns remaining under curfew for weeks,⁷⁸ telephone lines were disconnected and also the night time curfew continued for over a month.

After the incidents of January 2005, a façade of normalcy was maintained but violence kept erupting from time to time. The Inspector General of Police, the highest ranking police officer and widely perceived to be anti-Shia, was assassinated along with his bodyguards, on 23 March 2005, while travelling between Gilgit and Hunza.⁷⁹ His murder shook the establishment, with at least three Superintendents of Police (SPs) choosing dismissal over joining duty in the region. As the result of the deteriorating law and order situation, the government shut down educational institutions in the region, clamped curfew and called in the Army, plus a contingent of the Punjab Rangers and the Northern Area Scouts.⁸⁰ On 23 April, a bus carrying passengers from Skardu to Islamabad was intercepted at Bhasha, right outside Gilgit-Baltistan and two Baltis (people of Balti decent) were shot dead at point blank range.⁸¹ When the bodies reached Skardu, the entire region was in flames.

To pacify the population, the government agreed to withdraw the controversial text-books of Islamiyat and Urdu from the curriculum.⁸² However, on 17 July 2005, violence erupted again, when five passengers of a bus travelling from Gilgit to Islamabad were killed on the Karakoram

Highway (KKH), near Chilas.⁸³ Six more deaths were reported in revenge attacks, which left the entire region paralysed for over a week. Gilgit was still reeling from the shock of the sectarian attacks when a Union Council Chairman and three others were gunned down in a suburban area, triggering clashes between residents and police.⁸⁴ The situation got so out of hand that the administration had to issue shoot at sight orders.⁸⁵ Despite such strong measures, sporadic cases of violence continued in the region.

In the immediate aftermath of the devastating earthquake of 2005 which hit the region on 11 October 2005, at Basen, 58 km from Gilgit, a group of Sunnis opened fire on a Shia group, killing two and wounding others. Out of the three gunmen, one was nabbed by the local police who were later ordered to hand him over to the custody of the Pakistani Rangers. This led to a fresh spate of protests by the Shia community, leading to arrests. Out of the ten protesters arrested by the Rangers, the body of 15-year-old Maqsood Hussain was found on 12 October in a *nullah*, which triggered widespread protests and demonstrations.⁸⁶ On 13 October 2005, Shia students clashed with the Rangers in Gilgit and in the fracas that followed, six people, including two Rangers, were killed. This led to further skirmishes in which more lives were lost. The Shias thereafter blocked parts of the Karakoram Highway (KKH) to protest the deaths.⁸⁷ At least 15 people were killed in the two days of violence that followed in Gilgit. This was the first time when heavy weapons like rocket launchers and bombs were used in the region, against the population.⁸⁸

Since October 2005, sporadic cases of violence have been reported from the region. The buses plying on the Karakoram Highway were attacked regularly in the Sunni dominated Chilas Valley, where the inhabitants harbour strong anti-Shia sentiments.⁸⁹ Government officials, including those of the Army, Northern Light Infantry and police, have been identified and murdered while travelling in buses in areas falling under the control of rival sects. There were more than 100 fatalities in 2005, a large figure for a sparsely populated region. In March 2006, a day after Muharram, Shia protesters blocked the strategically-located Gilgit-Skardu and Gilgit-Hunza roads over Islamabad's decision to incarcerate senior Shia cleric Aga Rahat Kazmi.⁹⁰ In April 2006, the government moves to shift the district headquarters of the newly created Astore district from the Shia dominated Idgah town to the Sunni dominated

Gorikot, saw night long gun battles being fought between the police and Shia residents, resulting in the death of two women.⁹¹ 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 24 June 2006.⁹² Allama Hassan Turabi, a renowned Shia cleric from Baltistan was assassinated in Karachi on 14 July 2006.⁹³ Ironically, no one has ever been arrested or punished for his assassination.

Causes of Discontent

The causes of the violence are many and multi-layered, with some analysts terming it as a sectarian conflict, some as an artificially engineered one, some as due to a lack of political rights, while some believe that the violence is actually a consequence of Pakistan's lack of an effective federal system of government.⁹⁴ However, a careful analysis of the violence in the region indicates a deep-rooted alienation of the population, which has got accentuated with time. Though many factors are responsible for this alienation, some of the important ones have been analysed in the succeeding paragraphs.

Absence of Political Rights

The main cause behind the acts of violence in Gilgit and surrounding areas is the simmering discontent within the populace due to the absence of any genuine democratic and constitutional mechanism to resolve their problems. For over six decades, time has stood still on reforms in Gilgit-Baltistan owing to total neglect by successive regimes in Islamabad. The area has been under a virtual Martial Law, with the rights of the people suppressed and their needs neglected. Under the archaic FCR, every resident of the area has to report to the local police station once a month and all movements from one village to another have to be reported to the police station. The people have no representation in either House of Parliament nor do they have a right of access to the higher courts of Pakistan. Though it has been under the administrative control of Pakistan since 1947, the area is still ruled through the Northern Areas Legal Framework Order (LFO), 1994, which is based on colonial laws.⁹⁵

The 1948 agreement signed with the Kashmiri leaders transferred the administrative privileges of the region to the Government of Pakistan. The aim

was to use the region as a bargaining chip in a final settlement over Kashmir. It was assumed that in a plebiscite, the populace of Gilgit-Baltistan would opt for Pakistan anyway. But the agreement lacked public support or legal basis, as the contracting parties neither represented the people of the region, nor the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir.⁹⁶ Since then, the constitutional status of Gilgit-Baltistan has been kept in a limbo, making the region an extraordinary example of political and judicial ambivalence. The NALC was created in 1994, but remained a dysfunctional consultative forum, presided over by the Minister for Kashmir Affairs, without any substantive powers of legislation. The chief executive authority was vested in the office of the Federal Minister for Kashmir Affairs and Northern Areas (KANA) Division. A deputy chief executive nominated by the chief executive from among the members of the council served at the pleasure of the chief executive. In reality, all administrative authorities rested with the Chief Secretary and the other civilian bureaucracy based in Gilgit.⁹⁷

The council was a mixed bag of directly and indirectly elected members. Twenty-four directly elected members in the council were required to elect six women and six technocrats. There was no provision for a vote of no-confidence. Since the chief executive, who headed the NALC, was not elected, there was no scope for his accountability. Besides, the council had no provision for a leader of the opposition.⁹⁸ The realisation that it was a toothless body was reflected in the voter apathy during the last NALC elections in October 2004.⁹⁹ The popular perception as always remained that Islamabad indirectly rules – obviously in the name of a nominated Federal Minister of Kashmir and Northern Areas. In fact, the non-local Chief Secretaries have for long been the sole authority to run the areas on behalf of the Federal Minister while unchecked Deputy Commissioners run the district management, answerable to the Chief Secretary instead of the deputy chief executive. The bureaucratic rule – mainly from NWFP and Punjab — has heightened the sense of alienation and completely eroded the notion of self-rule from amongst the people's minds.¹⁰⁰

The right of the people to access justice was severely compromised in the absence of an independent judiciary. Without formation of a High Court and a bench of the Supreme Court in the region, access to justice remained an elusive dream for the mountain communities. The growing discontent

within the region was further compounded by the growing conviction that successive Pakistani governments, that have always called for “basic human rights” in Jammu and Kashmir, ignore these very rights in the case of the Northern Areas.¹⁰¹ Even the media has been muzzled in the region: *Kargil International*, a magazine published from Skardu, was banned and the editor arrested when he published certain comments against General Musharraf¹⁰².

In a landmark decision on 28 May 1999, the Supreme Court of Pakistan had ruled that “it was not understandable on what basis the people of the Northern Areas can be denied the fundamental rights guaranteed under the Constitution.” The court went on to say: “We allow the petitions and direct the respondent federation ... to ensure that the people in the Northern Areas enjoy their fundamental rights, namely, to be governed by their chosen representatives, and to have access to justice, *inter alia*, for the enforcement of their fundamental rights under the Constitution.” The six-month deadline kept stretching but Islamabad did not exhibit any intention of following the Supreme Court’s verdict.¹⁰³ The denial of normal political activities resulted in the diversion of energies to destructive sectarian and parochial divides that exploded into armed conflicts.¹⁰⁴

To counter the growing demands for local self-rule, the authorities have tried to divide the people along sectarian and ethnic lines. However, after failing to create large-scale divisions amongst the people, the government announced certain concessions to the locals in the form of the Gilgit-Baltistan (Empowerment and Self-Governance) Order, 2009. The order renamed the region as Gilgit-Baltistan, fulfilling a longstanding demand of the residents of the region. It also gave the region a local administration headed by a ‘Chief Minister’, to be elected by the Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly (GBLA), who would head a council of ministers, comprising six ministers and two advisors. The Legislative Assembly now consists of 24 directly elected members as well as six women and three technocrats to be elected by the members. The order has provided some financial autonomy for the region and a consolidated fund has accordingly been created. The budget for the region is now presented and approved by the GBLA. The order also introduced a judicial set-up with the establishment of an Appellate Court, comprising a Chief Justice and two other judges. There is also a provision in the order to eventually increase the strength of the court to five. Besides,

the order has a provision for a separate Public Service Commission, a Chief Election Commissioner and an Auditor General for the region.¹⁰⁵

However, with this order, the Pakistani government has taken the first step towards amalgamating this strategically significant region of the former state of Jammu and Kashmir, into Pakistan. The order does not provide either the Chief Minister or the Legislative Assembly with any worthwhile powers as the real powers rest with the Governor of Gilgit-Baltistan, who is appointed by the President of Pakistan, on the advice of the Prime Minister. Although there is an elected Legislative Assembly, the real power vests with the Gilgit-Baltistan Council, whose Chairman is the Prime Minister of Pakistan and most of whose members are appointees of the Pakistani government. Although, the number of subjects on which the Assembly can enact laws has been increased from 49 to 61, the council retains the exclusive power to legislate on 55 issues, which are of far greater significance. In any case, certain issues like defence, foreign affairs and security are beyond the purview of both the Assembly and the council. Similarly, the Chief Justice of the Appellate Court is appointed by the Chairman of the council (the Prime Minister of Pakistan) on the advice of the Governor (another appointee). Other judges are also appointed by the Chairman on the advice of the Governor, after seeking the views of the Chief Justice. The order stipulates that the budget will be presented to the Assembly and passed by it; however, what is significant is that it would be prepared by the Pakistani bureaucrats. Similarly, all members of the Public Service Commission, the Auditor General and the Election Commissioner are to be either the direct or indirect appointees of Islamabad. It is significant to note that the region has no representation in either the Pakistani Parliament or the Council of Ministers, who can have the final say in the future set-up of the region.¹⁰⁶

The order vests all the real executive, legislative and judicial powers with outsiders or their appointees; whereas the Assembly or the Council of Ministers is devoid of any worthwhile powers. The fact that terms like Governor and Chief Minister have been used rather than President and Prime Minister which are used for the heads of 'Azad Kashmir' indicates a more sinister design to the whole exercise. The cosmetic changes that have been incorporated are intended to give an impression of autonomy, whereas the real attempt is to separate this strategic region from other

parts of Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK) and eventually to gobble it. Since 1947, Pakistan has systematically worked towards this end. Immediately after occupation, it separated the state of Chitral, a vassal of the Maharaja of Kashmir from the region and incorporated it in the NWFP.¹⁰⁷ The very fact that the Government and President of Pakistan have passed orders on the future governance of an area that is not a part of Pakistan, even according to its Constitution, indicates Pakistan's malafide intent for the region. The order also has an interesting clause, which states that any law passed by the Assembly will be null and void if it contradicts the *Sunnah* and *Quran*. As Shias and Sunnis have a differing perception of what constitutes the *Sunnah*, the order could, thus, provide fuel to sectarian rifts.

Sectarian and Ethnic Marginalisation

The region contains a high percentage of Shias, with some being tribal in their ethnic origin and many Ismaili – the sect led by the Aga Khan, considered heretics by hardline Islamists.¹⁰⁸ It has been periodically injected with external populations with the connivance of the government, and clerics from other parts of the country have introduced the Twelver Shiaism (*Ithna Ashariyyah* – the official religion of Iran) and Sunni faiths too. This has resulted in creation of an area where geographic and linguistic boundaries often coincide with sectarian identities. Different valleys speak different languages and follow different denominations. Present-day Gilgit has a population of 60 per cent Shias and 40 per cent Sunnis; Hunza, Punial, Yasin, Ishkoman and Gupis comprise 100 percent Ismaili population; the Nagar region is 100 percent Shia; Chilas and Darel/ Tangir are 100 per cent Sunni; Astor is 90 per cent Sunni and 10 per cent Shia; whereas Baltistan contains 96 per cent Shias, 2 per cent Nurbakhtis (or Nurbakhshis – followers of Mohammed Nur Baksh), and 2 per cent Sunnis.¹⁰⁹

Poor economic conditions and lack of educational facilities have made Gilgit-Baltistan a hub of communal strife, more so 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 'brotherly' 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.¹¹⁰ Ironically, the impoverished parents have no choice but to put their children in *madaris* — the ubiquitous nurseries of religious extremism. 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.¹¹¹

Traditionally, the people of this region have been a non-violent lot. Different sects have lived 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 the Pakistani government. The incidents of 1988 have often been cited as proof, where the complicity of Zia’s government was clearly evident when Gilgit was attacked by Sunni armed militias. The then civil and military agencies had made no attempts to intervene;¹¹² following which there were sectarian riots, engineered to divide the people whenever they demanded their legitimate political rights. Subsequently, the Lashkar-e-Tayyeba gained influence in Gilgit-Baltistan during the Kargil War. At present, the entire population of the region 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 hardline groups. Although people of differing shades of faith normally cohabit in peace and harmony, petty issues tend to spark bloody clashes amongst them. Recent decades have, thus, witnessed many sectarian clashes and strife that have ominously resulted in the loss of innocent lives.

In order to preserve the unique identity of the region, the Dogra rulers had enacted a “State Subject Rule,” which barred outsiders from seeking permanent residence or naturalisation in the Princely States. However, under Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, this law was abolished in the 1970s which opened the floodgates of immigration for people from different parts of Pakistan to settle in Gilgit-Baltistan. Interestingly, both on the Indian side of the Line of Control (LoC) as well as in other areas of PoK, the rule is still in force.¹¹³ 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 successive Pakistani administrations to bring in people from various parts of Pakistan has created fear in the minds of the Baltis and Dardic people that the government is aiming at their ethnic marginalisation in their own traditional homeland. From 1998 to 2011, due to large-scale migration, the population in Gilgit-Baltistan surged by 63.1 per cent, as against 22.1 per cent in Mirpur-Muzaffarabad (“Azad Kashmir”), where the “State Subject Rule” is still in force. The fact that the population in Sunni dominated Diamer district more than doubled during the period, gives some credence to this allegation.¹¹⁴ Many nationalist organisations suspect the role of state agencies in the abnormal rise of population in Diamer district and neighbouring Kohistan district of KP. They believe that state agencies of Pakistan are involved in demographic engineering in this sparsely populated region.

The killings of security personnel and the sectarian strife are all, on some level, manifestations of the local vs. non-local confrontation. The local sects have enjoyed a peaceful coexistence for many years but the situation turned violent with the ‘outsider’ Pakhtoons, Kashmiri and *jihadi* elements coming into play in the area. The tragedy of the administration is that it suffers from a total lack of trust from those living in the area.¹¹⁵ In any case, grafting population as insurance in sensitive areas is an exercise in futility, which only serves to alienate the local population and fuels rifts, as is being presently witnessed.¹¹⁶

On numerous occasions, agencies have used religious leaders of different sects to fan hatred. In one of the bizarre incidents, intelligence agencies released a Punjabi cleric, Allama Ghulam Raza Naqvi, of the Sipah-e-Muhammad, from prison to “be sent to Gilgit where he would head a seminary to keep the pot of sectarian violence boiling.” His release was used as *quid pro quo* to grant freedom to Maulana Muhammad Ludhianvi, the rabidly anti-Shia leader of the banned Sunni outfit, Sipah-e-Sahaba and other imprisoned leaders of the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi.¹¹⁷ The authorities from Islamabad have often used the local Sunni minority in Gilgit-Baltistan to act as their accomplices in order to deprive the majority of their political rights. Even the Inspector General of Police (IGP), the highest ranking police official of Gilgit-Baltistan, Syed Tehseen Anwar, admitted the involvement of police personnel in sectarian causes and in sustaining the network of banned sectarian outfits in Gilgit-

Baltistan.¹¹⁸ It is estimated that over 1,000 lives have been lost since the sectarian conflicts surfaced in this region in 1988.¹¹⁹

Lack of Representation in Governance

The fact that none of the top officers in police, administration or the government is a local and even amongst the lower level functionaries, most are from outside Gilgit-Baltistan, has resulted in people perceiving the administration as an alien one lording over an imperial colony. The locals perceive that the “Browns from Plains” have replaced the “White Colonial Masters” from the British days.¹²⁰ Earlier, the Federal Minister KANA, an outsider, used to be the chief executive of the region, whereas in other provinces, it is always a local who is the chief executive. Even now, the Chief Minister does not have any worthwhile powers but is dependent on Islamabad and the bureaucrats, appointed by the authorities in Islamabad to run the government. Instances have been observed where senior officials with a local background are denied postings into the senior cadres of the decision-making hierarchy despite strong professional credentials.

All the key functionaries of the administration such as the Chief Secretary, Finance Secretary and Inspector General of Police are Pakistani bureaucrats, deputed from outside. The Pakistan government follows a ‘quota’ system for various regions to facilitate affirmative action for people from the underdeveloped parts. Still, one can hardly find officers from the region on higher posts either in Gilgit-Baltistan or in Islamabad. The media has reported a number of cases where people manage to get jobs from the quota of Gilgit-Baltistan through fake and forged documents.¹²¹ Despite this being public knowledge, the government has not instituted any measures to stem the rot in the system. For instance, some people from Gilgit-Baltistan who are present in the senior bureaucracy, police and Army are deliberately prevented from serving in this region – they can serve anywhere in Pakistan except in their own area. There have been complaints about there being no employees from Gilgit-Baltistan at the KANA Division in Islamabad, who could speak the local language and guide people to the proper offices. People are required to visit Islamabad for petty matters and have been demanding that arrangements be made within the region to address these problems as the employees of the ministry do not address their problems efficiently and

expeditiously, forcing them to stay on at Islamabad and Rawalpindi for several days.¹²² People from the region are generally aggrieved that those in positions of power do not understand their problems and, consequently, nothing is done by the government to address their genuine concerns.

The Army Monitoring Teams,¹²³ which were abolished from Pakistan, continued to work in this area and control transfers, postings and promotions of all government officials transgressing the powers of the department heads. Similarly, in Pakistan, the ethnic and sectarian sensitivities of any area are generally respected while selecting the officer corps as an ethnic and sectarian mix in the administration helps to neutralise resentments and builds confidence among the local population but that does not seem to be happening in this region.¹²⁴ The people have been complaining about the high-handed tactics and manipulation by non-local bureaucratic establishments, who have become the self-proclaimed guardians of the region, with no accountability to the local residents.¹²⁵ Pakistan has in the past suffered enormously on account of denying locals access to the higher echelons of the administration and establishment, and instead sending non-residents as 'colonists'. It lost East Pakistan to this 'wisdom' and is facing violence in Balochistan, due to a similar approach. It needs to take steps to prevent the same level of alienation and frustration in the region.¹²⁶

The people from the region have also been marginalised in the armed forces; in 1947, the Gilgit Scouts was manned totally by the local inhabitants at lower levels (other than officers). It was subsequently renamed as the Northern Light Infantry, led the Kargil campaign and won gallantry awards. In fact, two of its soldiers from the region were awarded the Nishan-e-Hyder during the Kargil War.¹²⁷ However, despite exhibiting gallantry and large scale sacrifice during the Kargil War, the share of the locals in the force has been coming down and it is now increasingly manned by 'outsiders' because the locals, mostly Shias, are no longer trusted.¹²⁸ Such actions have reinforced the belief amongst the local population that the Pakistani state does not consider them reliable.

The police and the law enforcement agencies in the region work under the draconian Police Act of 1861, a legacy of the colonial days, although Police Order 2002 has been enforced in all the parts of Pakistan. Besides, the administration prevents the locals from commanding any deployed

paramilitary force. Again, the Northern Areas Scouts and Northern Light Infantry, which have a presence in the region and whose rank and file comprise the locals, have hardly been deployed to ensure law and order in the region. In all such cases, the Rangers from Punjab and Sindh as well as the Frontier Constabulary from KP are rushed to manage the situation.¹²⁹

Economic Exploitation

Gilgit-Baltistan constitutes one of the most backward areas in the entire South Asia; the region seems to have missed the development bus completely. The literacy rates in the region are at 14 per cent, far below Pakistan's national average of 31 per cent, and the literacy rate of women is abysmally low at 3.5 per cent. There is one doctor for every 6,000 people and one hospital bed for 1,500 people. The local people are extremely poor and live in some of the harshest environmental conditions of weather and terrain. In the summers, the mercury often rises above 40°C; whereas in the winters, it drops below -25°C. The basic facilities, such as electricity, drinking water and elementary health care are virtually non-existent. Once autonomous and self-sufficient in food, the people of the region are today dependent on the Karakoram Highway for most supplies, including food. In recent years, a lethal mix of earthquakes, floods and political crises has rendered this crucial lifeline of the region, vulnerable, jeopardising the lives of over a million people.¹³⁰ The entire region does not have any kind of industry and over 85 per cent of the people live below the poverty line. Due to the limited means of earning a livelihood, the people of this region mostly depend on government offered jobs or join defence related institutions. Before Pakistan went nuclear, tourism was the economic lifeline but the explosions mixed with the aftermath of 9/11 have almost dried up this avenue. Despite huge publicity, only 4,000 foreign tourists could be attracted for the K2 Golden Jubilee celebrations in 2004.¹³¹ The resultant unemployment and lack of opportunities have created an explosive situation and have led to widespread unrest and frustration amongst the masses.¹³²

Less than 10 per cent of the hydroelectric potential of the region has been tapped for local use.¹³³ This especially is ironic as Pakistan intends to build mega dams at Skardu and Bhasha which will inundate millions of acres of populated fertile lands to provide cheap electricity to the rest of Pakistan.

Unfortunately, Bhasha Dam has been so planned that the royalty from the dam will go to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) as Article 161 (2) of the Pakistani Constitution stipulates that the royalty and the bulk of the net profits earned from a hydroelectric station shall go to the province where the station is situated. The Bhasha village, which will house only one per cent of the dam, is shown to be in the KP; hence, earnings from the dam will likely go to KP even though the dam would inundate 32 villages of Diamer district of Gilgit-Baltistan, with a combined population of 26,000, and thousands of *kanals* of agricultural land. More than 125 km of the KKH will be submerged in water because of the dam. The people of the region feel it is unfair that their land will be used to build a water reservoir that would benefit the rest of Pakistan when their own territorial status has not been decided. In the absence of a constitutional status, the people of Gilgit-Baltistan are apprehensive if they would get any royalty from the dam.¹³⁴ Although the government has recently given assurances about sharing of royalty, it has failed to assuage the hurt sentiments of the locals, who insist that the entire royalty must come to them. The people have also demanded that royalty paid to KP for the Tarbela Dam since its commissioning to the tune of over Rs 20 billion be instead spent on the economic development of the region as the dam is actually located in Gilgit-Baltistan.¹³⁵ Many people in the region complain that hydroelectric, tourism, mineral, and trade revenues of the region are being drained away to the federal coffers and used by other provinces, which, in their view, is nothing but exploitation.¹³⁶ They have accordingly been demanding fair returns on the natural resources of the region being used.¹³⁷

The region does not have adequate educational facilities. Lack of education has practically closed all avenues of government jobs. This has led to the demand for reservations in Indian educational institutions. There are no daily newspapers, radio or TV stations, exclusive to the region. The local people drew their subsistence from tourism, or by joining the NLI, both of which have declined considerably. Government service is another means of livelihood, but the natives who manage to join service are paid 25 per cent less than non-native entries from other parts. Funds earmarked for developmental schemes often lapse. The mainstay of the economy in this area is essentially agriculture, but like every feudal society, most of the land is held by a privileged few and the rest continue to live in sub-human conditions. The

government claims to have enhanced the development funds considerably, but the region continues to be underdeveloped and impoverished, despite various schemes.¹³⁸ Frustration from unemployment and discrimination is forcing the people to come out on the streets.

Cultural and Linguistic Marginalisation

The region is inhabited by ethnically distinct people of Turko-Mongoloid origin who have lived and practised Buddhism and Islam in a manner distinct from the rest of Pakistan.¹³⁹ Ethnically, it can broadly be divided into two major regions namely, Dardistan¹⁴⁰ and Baltistan. Dardistan is primarily inhabited by tribes speaking Dardic languages¹⁴¹ of Indo-Aryan and Iranian origins. The major languages spoken in the region are linguistically quite distinct from all other languages spoken in Pakistan.¹⁴² Two remote and rather inaccessible valleys, Yasin and Hunza-Nagir, are still inhabited by Burushaski speaking population, a unique language, which does not have any relation with any other known language in the world. There are some parts of Hunza, where Domaaki is spoken; Wakhi (spoken in parts of Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Xinjiang in Western China) is spoken in the upper parts of the Hunza Valley and in some valleys of Ghizar. Inhabitants of Yasin and Ishkoman speak Shina, Khowar (the language spoken in Chitral) and Wakhi besides Burushaski. Different dialects of Shina are spoken in Gilgit, although Burushaski is used in some parts. Shina is also spoken in Diamer and most areas of Ghizar, whereas in Chilas and Indus Valley, below Chilas, both Shina and Kohistani are used.¹⁴³ Shina, Wakhi, Domaaki, Khowar and Kohistani are related languages and belong to the Dardic group of languages.¹⁴⁴ All these languages are without any standard script and have many dialects. Baltistan is inhabited by Baltis, who ethnically belong to Tibeto-Mongoloid stock and speak Balti, a dialect of Ladakhi, which belongs to the Tibetan group of languages. Balti originally had a Tibetan script, which was replaced by the Persian script subsequently. Some Englishmen also the used Roman script to write a Balti primer.¹⁴⁵

The abrogation of the State Subject Rule and the construction of the Karakoram Highway in the 1980s, which connected this once inaccessible region to Pakistan and the 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, in the subsequent years, it ushered in unprecedented socio-cultural and economic change in the Northern Areas. It altered work patterns in the region as well as the social, political and cultural landscape, and agricultural practices there. But worst of all, it brought with it outsiders, who managed to spread fanaticism in the area and changed 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.'¹⁴⁶

The impoverished people of the region believe that their unique ethno-cultural identity is being threatened and the state has not taken any steps to promote and protect the unique culture and languages belonging to the different valleys of 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 the 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.

Of late, people in the region, especially in Baltistan, have started attempts to reestablish links with all things Tibetan or Ladakhi in a last-ditch attempt to save their culture from total Iran-style Islamisation. People here consider culture as more than a question of being Islamic and non-Islamic and are threatened by 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 the Tibetan script as they consider the Arabic script to be grossly inadequate to highlight the richness in their languages. As part of this revival process, the Baltistan Students Federation has made the *yung drung* (swastika), the ancient Bon symbol of prosperity, their logo.¹⁴⁷

As part of these efforts, local scholars have taught themselves how to read the Tibetan script and have initiated a dialogue with their counterparts in Ladakh through the internet. They research and publish mostly in Urdu, on topics ranging from the ancient Bon tradition to the Gesar epic. Though Tibetan-Buddhism and Bon were replaced over the course of centuries, the process of Islamisation has accelerated after the region came under Pakistan's control, especially after the Iranian revolution, but the information age and current soul-searching might help Baltistan embrace its ancient diversity.¹⁴⁸ Accordingly, people have been demanding the opening of the Kargil-Skardu bus service to revive their cultural links with the Ladakh region, especially Kargil and the 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*.¹⁴⁹ The people, therefore, consider Pakistan's decision not to allow the bus service as an attempt to prevent their cultural consolidation and development of traditional cultural linkages with people across the LoC.

Current Status

The year 2007 was relatively peaceful for the region and despite provocations, there was hardly any significant case of sectarian violence in the region. The year 2008, though considered peaceful, saw 18 people being killed in sectarian violence, including the Director of the Agriculture Department of Gilgit. However, 2009 again saw a spurt in sectarian violence. It started on 19 February, when two Shias were killed in an attack on a van in Gilgit. Then on 20 April, Syed Asad Zaidi, the Deputy Speaker of the Northern Areas (earlier official name of Gilgit-Baltistan) Legislative Assembly was shot dead, along with his companion, in Kashrote, which is a Sunni dominated neighbourhood of Gilgit city. Although perceived as a pro-government leader, he was accused of having delivered a strong anti-Sunni speech in Gilgit in 1971.¹⁵⁰

Subsequently, on 26 June, a Shia political activist, Sadiq Ali, from Jafrabad, Nagir was arrested and tortured to death in detention.¹⁵¹ Two months later, the killing of the rabidly anti-Shia party, Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan's leader Allama Ali Sher Hyderi in Sindh, led to widespread rioting in Gilgit. As a result, there were fierce gun battles in Gilgit between the two sects and all the markets and commercial establishments were forced to close. Again

in September 2009, two Sunni Pakhtoon migrants and three native Shias were killed in Gilgit; in addition, a bus with Shia passengers from Baltistan was torched.¹⁵² On 26 September 2009, just three days ahead of Pakistani Prime Minister Gilani's visit to Gilgit, a bomb planted in a shop blew up and engulfed the city in a fresh bout of sectarian riots.¹⁵³ In the aftermath of the blasts, gun battles devoured more than 12 people, including Raja Ali Ahmed Jan, a prominent leader of the Pakistan Muslim League.¹⁵⁴ After a brief pause, again on 10 November, during electioneering for the newly constituted Assembly, three employees of Pakistan State Oil, including the area manager Ali Mohammad were killed and two others injured when their vehicle while enroute from Astore was attacked by unidentified gunmen near Pari, 35 km from Gilgit.¹⁵⁵

There were also reports of collusion between the Taliban and Sunni extremists in the region, as a large number of them have moved to Gilgit-Baltistan after the operations in Swat Valley and other parts of Malakand. Over 300 suspected terrorists without valid identity documents were expelled from Gilgit and its adjoining areas, ostensibly to ensure the security of Chinese engineers and workers working on the Karakoram Highway. This clearly indicated the increased presence of Taliban cadres from outside in Gilgit-Baltistan.¹⁵⁶ The Taliban presence has resulted in the mode of sectarian violence graduating from sniper firings to bomb blasts. It is believed that local Sunni youth have acquired expertise in making bombs and suicide jackets from the Taliban. The Taliban has also succeeded in indoctrinating local Sunni youths with their extremist brand of Islam. An Al Qaeda member, Abdullah Rehman, in April 2009, threatened to blow up a four-star hotel in Baltistan. In May 2009, following a bomb blast in Baltistan, two Sunnis were arrested with a large cache of explosive material and hand grenades. Subsequently, in July 2009, a bomb was hurled in Gilgit at Bagrot Hostel, which killed two students and injured several others. The increasing influx of the Taliban has not only exacerbated the sectarian tensions, but also led to a change in the demographic profile of the region and erosion of the local cultural identity. The use of the NLI, which has predominantly Shia troops from Gilgit-Baltistan, in operations against the Taliban in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), has further accentuated the sectarian divide in this region where the Taliban now has

a fair presence.¹⁵⁷ One Taliban militant hailing from Peshawar was arrested from Gilgit on 26 January 2010.¹⁵⁸

The elections based on the Gilgit-Baltistan (Empowerment and Self-Governance) Order, 2009, were held on 12 November 2009, in which most of the Pakistani political parties and local groups participated. Leaders of most political parties campaigned in the region during the elections. Almost 40 per cent of the 714, 966 eligible voters participated in the elections.¹⁵⁹ As has always been the case in PoK, the ruling party in Islamabad, namely the PPP, emerged as the winner in these elections. The heavy presence of security forces allowed women to freely participate in the elections except in Diamer district, where women were forbidden from voting, under the Taliban's influence. Sunni hardliners also tried to prevent women from voting in two polling booths in Danyor, near the city of Gilgit.¹⁶⁰ The elections saw the advent of secular parties like the Muhajir Quami Movement (MQM) in the region, but an undercurrent of sectarianism was clearly evident in the polling. Most of the voting took place along sectarian lines. The elections saw the PPP fielding a Sunni candidate for the first time in immigrant dominated Gilgit-2 constituency, but it resulted in splitting of the Sunni votes between the PPP and Pakistan Muslim League–Nawaz (PML-N), resulting in the victory of an independent Shia candidate.¹⁶¹ This resulted in all six seats in Gilgit district being won by Shia candidates, aggravating sectarian tensions. Similarly, in Ghanche district of Baltistan, sectarian polarisation helped Grand Nurbakhshi Mufti M Abdullah to win against Pakistan Muslim League–Quaid-e-Azam (PML-Q) candidate Amina Ansari.¹⁶²

Despite lack of media coverage, and intimidation by the security forces, the nationalist groups working against continued Pakistani occupation of the region, did fairly well. The All Parties National Alliance (APNA), a grouping of nationalist parties boycotted the elections, viewing them as a prelude to Pakistan's intentions of annexing this strategically significant region. Of the parties that participated, campaigning by the Balwaristan National Front (BNF) and Gilgit Baltistan Democratic Alliance (GBDA) was banned and many of their activists were arrested. The house of the BNF candidate in Gilgit-2 constituency was bombed.¹⁶³ Many opposition parties and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), including the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) found flaws with the conduct of the elections

and accused the federal government of using the government machinery to influence voters.¹⁶⁴ The elections to LA19 (Ghizer-1) constituency, which were held later on 21 December 2009, were allegedly rigged by the agencies to deprive Nawaz Naji, leader of the Balwaristan National Front, a well-deserved victory. This led to rioting by BNF supporters, resulting in damage to government property.¹⁶⁵ Naji eventually won the by-election from the same seat on 28 April 2011, as the seat felt vacant after the appointment of Pir Ali Shah as the Governor of Gilgit-Baltistan.¹⁶⁶

The year 2010 was relatively peaceful. There were in all 13 sectarian attacks in the region, which resulted in seven persons being killed and 16 getting wounded. Most of these attacks took place in and around Gilgit. There were 10 incidents of targeted killing of Shias in Gilgit city. August was the most violent month, when sectarian clashes were triggered after a football match in Gilgit. It took considerable efforts on the part of the security forces to restore a modicum of peace in the city. A library of the Nurbakhshis was set ablaze in a village in Ghanchay district. A peace committee comprising members of both Shia and Sunni sects was set up in Gilgit city to promote religious harmony, but has failed to deliver.¹⁶⁷ The violence picked up in 2011, with 26 attacks taking place in the region, which resulted in the death of 9 persons and injuries to 24.¹⁶⁸

During 2012, there has been an expansion of the arena of sectarian violence in and around the region. On 28 February, unidentified gunmen forced passengers to disembark from four Gilgit-bound passenger buses in Kohistan district and killed 18 Shias. In the retaliatory protests in Gilgit, two people from the Sunni-dominated Chilas were killed.¹⁶⁹ So strong was the reaction that protestors in Kharmang tehsil in Baltistan district marched towards the LoC and demanded opening of the Skardu-Kargil road so that they could get supplies from, and trade with, Ladakh, in case the Karakoram Highway was rendered unsafe for them.¹⁷⁰ Maulana Ataullah Sadiq, the Deputy Secretary General of the Sunni sectarian outfit Ahl-e-Sunnat wal Jamaat, which is nothing but a new incarnation of the rabid Sipah-e-Sahiba Pakistan, was arrested on 28 March in connection with the killings. However, a rally organised by the outfit in Gilgit to demand his release on 03 April 12 was attacked with hand grenades by two motorcyclists, suspected to be Shias. The blasts killed at least five men and injured 50 others, which resulted

in rioting and subsequent imposition of curfew. In the retaliatory violence, six passengers of a bus coming from Rawalpindi were forced to disembark at Chilas, a Sunni-dominated town South of Gilgit, and shot dead in cold blood. Six other buses were set on fire at Chilas.¹⁷¹ The curfew in the region continued for almost a month. In a repeat of the tragic events of February, on 16 August 2012, 25 Shia passengers were pulled out from three buses heading for Gilgit-Baltistan at the Babusar Top Pass, in Mansehra district and shot dead. A spokesman for the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan claimed responsibility for the killings, indicating a clear nexus between the Taliban and Sunni sectarian outfits.¹⁷²

Conclusion

Gilgit-Baltistan has enormous strategic significance; it is the region that connects Pakistan with China and provides Pakistan with most of its fresh water resources. The region is also rich in natural resources. Pakistan is keen to prolong its control over the region with the intention of eventually incorporating this part of Jammu and Kashmir into its own territory. Any clamour for autonomy is dissipated by creating divisions amongst the local populace and instigating sectarian disturbances. The social divide along ethnic and religious lines has been exploited by the Pakistani intelligence agencies and security forces to weaken the demand for genuine political autonomy and basic human rights by the local populace. The instances of state-sponsored Shia-Sunni and Shia-Nurbakhshi riots have aggravated the socio-political polarisation in Gilgit-Baltistan.

The agencies have also used the sectarian tensions to diffuse the opposition of the local population to Bhasha Dam, which will inundate large tracts of land in Gilgit-Baltistan and a 120-km stretch of the Karakoram Highway, which links China with Pakistan and provides the main access to Gilgit-Baltistan for Pakistan. The student bodies in Gilgit-Baltistan have also started asserting that Chitral and Kohistan in NWFP are part of Gilgit-Baltistan and were separated by Pakistan as part of a conspiracy. They have emphasised that the region is a disputed territory and Pakistan should not build a mega dam without resolving its status.¹⁷³ These newer and growing demands are nothing but a manifestation of the increasing alienation of the population from Pakistan.

Gilgit-Baltistan is legally and constitutionally an integral part of India. Unfortunately, successive Indian governments have maintained a stoic silence over the happenings there. In the past, residents from the region have demanded reservations in Indian educational institutions for the economic development of the people of the region. Sectarian violence in Gilgit-Baltistan is an attempt by the Pakistani establishment to deny the local residents their legitimate rights by embroiling them in internecine war. Growing Talibanisation, often in connivance with the state agencies, has further accentuated the prevailing sectarian divide in Gilgit-Baltistan. Nasir Aziz Khan, spokesperson for the United Kashmir People's National Party (UKPNP), raised the issue at the 20th session of UN Human Rights Council and stated that one's religious faith or lack of one had become a reason to warrant execution and murder. The state has not shown any inclination to deal with the organised crimes being perpetrated by the militant organisations backed by the state agencies.¹⁷⁴

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