

# Contemporary Gilgit Baltistan

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While there have been numerous research works and publications on J&K on the east of LoC, there has been a severe gap in understanding the two J&K entities on the west of LoC. Gilgit Baltistan, in particular, has been a neglected region – both nationally and internationally.

Alok Bansal's book titled "Gilgit Baltistan and its Saga of Unending Human Rights Violations" is a welcome addition, due to the above fact – lack of literature on the subject. This analysis is partially a review of the book, and partly an examination of contemporary issues relating to Gilgit Baltistan.

First, a short note on Alok Bansal's book on Gilgit Baltistan. A former Navy officer, and currently a Director of the India Foundation in New Delhi, Bansal has been a Pakistan watcher for long. His previous book was on Balochistan. One could sense his ideological affiliation in writing the book; however, it should not stop one from reviewing the book objectively.

The objective of the book is to make one "knowledgeable" about Gilgit Baltistan. In his introduction, the author refers to the denial of human rights in Gilgit Baltistan and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's call on the subject during his speech on 15 August 2016. According to the author, he wanted the book to focus on the violation of Human Rights, threats of radicalisation from Pakistan, and the historical linkages between Gilgit Baltistan and the rest of J&K.

The book does focus on the following: first, it looks at the people, demography, language, religion and religious influence, topography etc.; second, it delves into the early history of Gilgit Baltistan, starting from the Buddhist period. The political history of Gilgit Baltistan during 1947-48 has a particular focus, followed by the political status of the region under Pakistan. Zia and the beginning of Sectarian Violence in Gilgit Baltistan, followed by the causes of discontent in Gilgit Baltistan becomes the final parts of the analysis of the book.

However, does the above make the analysis of Gilgit Baltistan comprehensive? Are there other new areas/issues that need to be looked into, to make the analysis contemporary as well?

## Contextualising Gilgit Baltistan

First, Gilgit Baltistan within the larger J&K framework has been one of the ignored sub-regions – politically and academically. While many laments about the lack of literature and interest about Gilgit Baltistan, the same disinterest could be seen towards some of the other regions of J&K. For example, despite access – physical and political, the following regions do not get the attention they deserve: Rajouri and Poonch, Doda-Kishtwar-Bhaderwah triangle, and Bani-Basholi axis. While Leh has a better exposure, thanks to more to its tourist outreach, the Turtuk and Zaskar pockets, along with Kargil are academic, research and political blind spots. So Gilgit Baltistan is not the only sub-region of J&K that lacks national and international interest.

Second, in the contemporary period, India has repeatedly been emphasising on its legal and historical claim; politically and emotionally, New Delhi has abdicated Gilgit Baltistan. Except for occasional speeches referring to an earlier resolution, the Indian Parliament hardly has taken any substantial action to substantiate its legal claim towards GB.

On the other hand, Pakistan's legal and historical claim has been weak. However, it has made its physical and political claim stronger. It has been increasing every day; during the recent years, Pakistan has also been looking forward to making a legal claim over GB. The Constitutional Order of 2009 during Zardari's period was a part of this process.

Third, contemporary Gilgit Baltistan stands disconnected physically, politically and emotionally with the other regions of J&K on both sides of the Line of Control. Pakistan has smartly divided its occupied territory into two administrative units with Muzaffarabad and Gilgit as two capitals. The institutions of governance are different for the two political J&K entities administered by Pakistan.

Worse was the linkages between GB and rest of J&K on the Indian side. While culturally and historically GB was better networked with Ladakh, it also had strong ties with the Valley. Many from GB came to Srinagar via Gurez for various purposes from educational to economic.

The divided families in Ladakh-GB region would underline the history of these two regions from a secular perspective, and the linkages to Buddhism from Leh to Gilgit would emphasise the religious past of these two regions. Historically, Kargil used to be the Centre, with Leh and Gilgit being outposts for the traders moving from and to Tibet and Central Asia. The small and independent museum in Kargil would underline the economic and historical linkages that these two regions had.

Unfortunately, these links stands completely disconnected today. While during the last decade, the cross-LoC interactions tried to link Jammu and Kashmir regions with Muzaffarabad and Rawlakot, the Kargil-Skardu link and thereby the Ladakh-GB interactions.

Successive governments in New Delhi from Nehru to Modi will have to take the blame in ignoring the breakup of this linkage. So should be the successive governments ruling from Jammu and Srinagar. It was not just New Delhi, but also Srinagar (and Jammu) that let GB cast away politically and emotionally.

Fourth, Pakistan's recent initiatives towards GB – seem to have a political strategy. It should be no coincidence that the GB Order 2009 came during a period when the four provinces within Pakistan are divided over sharing of water resources. The fact that the Indus cuts through GB should have weighed heavily in Pakistan's calculations, along with the controversy of Bhasha-Diamer dam even before the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) became a reality.

GB has a broader strategic value to Pakistan today than ever before. The physical linkage between Pakistan and China runs through the Karakoram Highway. The recently introduced bus service between Lahore and Kashgar have to cross Gilgit. Hence its recent attempts to introduce new legislation are aimed at addressing the political vacuum in Gilgit Baltistan, thereby to prevent any massive scale protests or movements from the region.

Added to the above is growing sectarian violence within GB. The region with a Shia majority has become a target of sectarian violence led by the Sunni extremists in recent years. With their bases both in Karachi and in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Sunni extremists have been targeting the innocent population. The Karakoram Highway witnessed a series of sectarian attacks; passengers were forced to get down from the buses and indiscriminately fired upon. Shia pilgrims from GB to Iran were targeted in Balochistan.

A section believes that there is a design to change the demographic nature of GB by forcing Sunnis to settle in the region. Astore and Diamer are facing this demographic pressure already.

### **CPEC and Contemporary Gilgit Baltistan**

Today, more than anything, the CPEC plays a substantial role in Islamabad's calculations towards GB.

The CPEC project today is more than the initially designed USD 45 billion. For Pakistan, GB is essential for two reasons, from the CPEC perspective. First, the entire movement from China to Pakistan crosses through GB. Buses, trucks, people and trade will have to criss-cross between Gwadar and Kashgar through Gilgit. GB is the only physical linkage for Pakistan to receive the CPEC.

Second, as a part of the CPEC projects, there has been a substantial Chinese investment in GB. From infrastructure to energy, the Chinese plans cover a larger gamut in GB. It is imperative for Pakistan that the Chinese projects in GB are on time and track – else, Islamabad's plan to physically link Punjab and Xinjiang, thereby the two countries will turn into smoke.

Today, Pakistan looks at GB, not from its larger J&K political pivot, but through the CPEC prism. Pakistan will be even willing to forsake its J&K position on GB to reap the CPEC benefits.

What will the CPEC do to the larger Pakistani claim and political positioning in GB needs to be explored and forecasted.

### **Will there be a GB Spring?**

Early this year, there was a Pashtun movement in KP, spreading to the rest of Pakistan, demanding

better governance and accountability. Will there be a similar movement in GB, demanding justice, governance and law based rule?

There were glimpses during the recent months when there were protests against taxation. There were demands from GB to make the region as the fifth province of Pakistan. However, they have not succeeded. The first one was put down; the second one will be a political nightmare for Pakistan, it would make the GB as the only non-Sunni majority province

The new generation, which is studying in Islamabad, Lahore, Karachi and elsewhere outside Pakistan, is better connected. Though Pakistan has succeeded in preventing any media from emerging in GB, today with the advent of social media, the absence of print and electronic version is unlikely to be a hindrance to reach out.

With CPEC projects bringing more funds into GB, a section sees the same as an opportunity. While the other fears that it would make the region into a Pakistan colony and Chinese dumping ground.

Will there be a GB spring? Much will depend on the CPEC fallouts. Hence, it is also imperative to analyse and forecast the CPEC implications for GB.

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