



PAKISTAN'S HISTORICAL NEGLECT OF GILGIT-BALTISTAN

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Most of the former colonies across Asia and Africa successfully fought independence wars against their colonial master(s) and attained the right of self-determination towards the end of the 20th century. In colonial India, the struggle for independence from British Raj resulted in the partition of the subcontinent into two independent states: Hindu majority state, India, and Muslim majority state, Pakistan. At the time of partition, the division of the princely state of Kashmir posed a real challenge; as the ruler of the state was a Hindu while the majority of the population was Muslim. Against the will of the majority, the Hindu Maharaja Hari Singh signed the instrument of accession with India, on 26th October 1947. At this critical juncture of history, Gilgit-Baltistan (though not in its entirety, as many regions within GB, operated as autonomous political entities like Hunza and Nagar) used to be the third province of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir.

The territorial dispute over Kashmir between India and Pakistan was taken to the United Nations (UN) by India in 1948. And with the agreement of both Pakistan and India, Gilgit-Baltistan was made an integral part of the princely state of Kashmir. Resultantly, the region of Gilgit-Baltistan, despite getting independence from the Dogra Raj on 1st Nov 1949 became part and parcel of the Kashmir dispute. The UN came up with UNCIP (United Nations Commission for India and Pakistan) resolutions of 1948 and 1949 to resolve the conflict. These resolutions outlined that the right of self-determination of the indigenous population residing within the territorial boundaries of Kashmir (including Gilgit-Baltistan) was recognized through a plebiscite. Both India and Pakistan were signatories to ensure the prerequisites for the plebiscite but neither has fulfilled it. Historically, both countries have handled the Kashmir dispute as a matter of their territorial sovereignty and not something that has left the life of the millions living across the line of division in perils.

As far as Gilgit-Baltistan is concerned, linked to the Kashmir dispute, the region has not been allowed local administration with complete internal autonomy, as per UNCIP resolutions and neither has been given constitutional recognition by Pakistan. Gilgit-Baltistan over the last seven decades is in a constitutional void. Due to this, the local population can often be heard complaining about their identity crisis. As, in the absence of constitutional cover, the inhabitants of the region do not qualify as citizens of the state, rather their existence gets reduced to mere subjects- to be adjusted and accommodated. The recently held mass protests in GB stem from the disputed status of Gilgit-Baltistan.

Anjuman-e-Tajiran and Awami Action Committee Gilgit-Baltistan jointly led the recent round of protests which were mainly against the removal of wheat subsidy, imposition of illegal taxes in the form of increased electricity bills and the state acquiring common lands in the name of Khalisa Sarkar. The disputed status of the region means that until the vote of the plebiscite on Kashmir is not conducted, Gilgit-Baltistan is entitled to have special treatment as compared to the other four provinces of the country. According to the UNCIP resolutions, Gilgit-Baltistan is entitled to subsidies and amenities on more than fifty subjects from which only wheat subsidy was introduced by the then Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Apart from the wheat subsidy, the region is supposed to have tax-free zone status, precisely for not having representation in the parliament of the country. Furthermore, the State Subject Rule (SSR), in abeyance since the 1970s, instructs that the common lands will always belong to the local population and may only be utilized for the betterment of the local population, barring outsiders from bringing demographic changes.

Around these important issues, a mass movement erupted at the end of December, 2022 and people continued to protest for eight straight days in subzero temperatures. Unfortunately, their grievances went unnoticed by the national mainstream media. Be it the geostrategic location or natural resources, tourist spots or wildlife, it appears as if everything in Gilgit-Baltistan is important for mainland Pakistan except the people who are living there.

The state's actions as a response to the political deprivations of the local population make GB a 'political society.' The framework of political society, as against civil society, was developed by Partha Chatterjee, a stalwart of Subaltern studies. He describes that, unlike civil society, in a political society the state does not recognize the population as its citizens; thus, the state either actively uses force to subvert genuine, organic demands or it sees every issue related to the masses as a part of crisis management: to be dealt with the aim of adjustment and accommodation on a temporal basis.

The same has been happening in GB. Instead of carefully listening to the rightful demands of the movement and showing sincere resolve to find a permanent solution (as one expects within civil society), FIRs were launched against the political activists who participated in the protests. Moreover, as a soft strategy, to divert mass attention and diffuse the highly charged sentiment against the irregularities of the state, winter sports and other festivals have been organized at the state level. Hence, it can be seen that the miseries of indigenous people in the political society of GB are conveniently invisibilised through coercion or by an irrational overemphasis on the nature and beauty of the region.

There is no denying accepting that the world, including Pakistan, recognizes Gilgit-Baltistan as an integral part of the Kashmir dispute and Pakistan alone cannot reach a peaceful solution to it. However, one should also be cognizant of the fact that the disputed political status of GB is contributing to the sufferings and hardships of the indigenous population, and it is only Pakistan that can ameliorate the situation by taking some bold steps. It is high time for Pakistan to reimagine the political status of GB exclusive of the Kashmir dispute. Leaving Gilgit-Baltistan in a perpetual 'state of exception' has not helped the Kashmir cause as was thought. On 5th August 2019, India formally extended its constitution to its part of Kashmir by repealing articles 35A and 370 which guaranteed the special status. On this side of the border, Pakistan has neither ensured special status to GB (like Azad Jammu Kashmir) nor brought the region under its constitutional ambit.

The highly literate and politically aware youth of GB is now desperate to come out of the 'state of exception' that usurps them of their basic rights. Undoubtedly, Gilgit-Baltistan, with its geostrategic importance and untapped potential (both in human and natural resources), has always been an asset for Pakistan. However, it is the call of the changing regional dynamics that the statesmen in Islamabad need to be circumspect in dealing with the disputed political status of the region because it is the only obstacle on the road towards development and prosperity of its people, as well as of the country at large.

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