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Sectarianism and Human Rights Violation in Gilgit Baltistan

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Abstract

Gilgit Baltistan (G-B) was a part of the Jammu and Kashmir province, which with the merger of India, legally became an integral part of the Indian Republic. But since 1947, G-B has been illegally under the control of Pakistan. The sectarian conflict and human rights violation in the G-B region by Pakistan has continuously been going on for the last six decades. Though Pakistan has been consuming the natural resources of the region to serve its economic interests, it has excluded the people of the region from any constitutional, political and economic rights. The government of Pakistan and its army has promoted sectarianism in Gilgit Baltistan, and at the same time, the Government has tried to depress the voice of the people of the region and has not allowed it to be exposed on the world stage, which has been going on continuously till date. By looking at all the above points, the research paper attempts to explain Pakistan's human rights violations and sectarian conflict in the G-B region

Key Words - Gilgit Baltistan, Sectarian conflict, Jammu and Kashmir, Human Rights.

Objective of the Study

1 To examine the sectarian conflict and human rights violation in Gilgit Baltistan.

2 To know the major factors responsible for the Sectarian Conflict.

Methodology

In this study, the researcher has used historical, descriptive and analytical methods. Both primary, as well as secondary sources, have been used to collect data and information regarding sectarian conflict and human rights violation in Gilgit Baltistan.

Historical Background of Gilgit Baltistan (G-B)

G-B, originally a part of the erstwhile princely state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and later part of Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK), is legally an integral part of India. Together with the so called Azad Jammu & Kashmir (AJK), these sections of the Kashmiri territory have been under Pakistan's control since 1947.¹ Geographically G-B is situated in the trans-Himalayan region on the northwestern corner of the Kashmir Valley. G-B was ruled directly by the British, who had taken it on a 60 year lease from Hari Singh, the Hindu ruler of the Muslim-majority state in 1935. The British also returned the Gilgit Agency to the Maharaja of J&K, 15 days after India attained independence, Gilgit again came under the direct rule of the Maharaja as a legal part of his state. After independence, both India and Pakistan went for territorial consolidation. The Maharaja of J&K decided not to accede to either India or Pakistan. But, the situation soon changed as Pakistan invaded the princely state in October 1947. When Hari Singh acceded to India on October 26, 1947, the Gilgit Scouts rose in rebellion, led by their British commander Major William Alexander Brown. Pakistan captured a part of Kashmir through the invasion, including G-B. Pakistan was assisted by Major William Alexander Brown, who was then the head of the Gilgit Scout.² As already stated, the other part of PoK, i.e. G-B, came under direct rule of the central government of Pakistan after the Karachi Agreement of 1949, and was termed 'Northern Areas'. However, the region did not find mention in the constitution of Pakistan.³ The territory of present-day Gilgit-Baltistan became a separate administrative unit in 1970 under the name "Northern Areas". It was formed by the amalgamation of the former Gilgit Agency, the Baltistan district and several small former princely states, the larger of which being Hunza and Nagar.

'Northern Areas' was renamed 'Gilgit-Baltistan' under the Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self Governance Order of August 2009, signed by Pakistan president Asif Ali Zardari, which also aimed to empower the people of G-B. However, scholars state that the real power rests with the governor and not with chief minister or elected assembly.⁴

Area and Population

The G-B region has a geographical area of 72,496 sq. km as per Pakistani projections. Under an agreement reached between Pakistan and China on March 2, 1963, Pakistan handed over 5,180 square km of territory to China. Gilgit-Baltistan is administratively divided into three divisions which in turn are divided into 10 districts, including Gilgit, Skardu, Diamer, Ghizer, Hunza, Nagar, Ghanche, Astore, Kharmang and Shigar. The main centres of political activity are the towns of Gilgit, Ghizer and Skardu. Skardu is also the headquarters of Pakistan Army's Northern Light Infantry regiment.⁵

According to 1998 census, the population of G-B was 870,347, while estimated population in 2015 was 1800000.⁶ In G-B, nearly 100 percent of population is Muslim. It is also the home of diverse languages, ethnicity, sectarian and tribal identities. There are eight major ethnic groups, namely Baltis, Shinas, Yashkuns, Moghals, Kashmiris, Pathans, Ladakhis and Turkis. They speak the dialects of Balti, Brushaski, Khawer, Wakhi, Turki, Tibeti, Pashto, Urdu and Persian. Four different sects of Islam are prevalent in G-B, Sunni, Shia, Ismail and Noorbakshi. Although Shias constitute a clear majority in the region, except in Diamer and Astore districts.⁷

Pakistan, on the other hand, has been trying to change the demography of Gilgit-Baltistan for decades. In 1970s, former Pakistan Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto had abrogated the State Subject Rule to allow Sunni Muslims to settle down in the Shia-dominated Gilgit-Baltistan. This has worked in Pakistan's favour.⁸ Due to this the demography of G-B, which resulting the massive reduction of the Shia population from 80 to 39 per cent. In a recent study conducted by the Law and Society Alliance, a New Delhi-based think tank headed by N C Bipindra, the population of G-B is now approximately 1.5 million, with around 39 per cent Shia, 27 per cent Sunni, 18 per cent Ismaili and 16 per cent Nurbakhshi.⁹

Sectarian Conflict in Gilgit Baltistan and Human right Violation

Sectarian violence and strife are the form of communal violence, which is inspired by sectarianism, between different sects of one particular mode of an ideology or religion within a nation or community. Religious segregation often plays a role in sectarian violence. Sectarianism in the G-B region of undivided State of J&K, presently controlled by Pakistan, needs to be highlighted as it not only fuels mass discontent but also keeps the region boiling. The brunt of the radical Islamization policy of General Zia-ul-Haq in this region focused on settling outsiders in the area, impacting directly and adversely human rights of the local peoples. The policy of Islamization, Afghan intervention and Islamic Revolution in Iran in late 1970s, have all had a cumulative effect on sectarian turmoil, which resulted the large scale violation of Human rights. Even after these events subsided the Musharraf regime, who adopted the policy of 'enlightened moderation, followed by the 'restoration of democracy in Islamabad, nothing spectacular has happened so far to assuage the wounds of the people. In fact the sectarian monster has raised its ugly head more menacingly.¹⁰

Historically, the diverse communities of G-B have lived together in relative harmony. Ethnic and tribal identities and social ties developed over centuries were valued more than sectarian affiliations. G-B has Shia majority in its estimated 1.8 million populace. The rest of Pakistan, having Sunni majority, instigated sectarian violence in the region from the times of Zia-ul-Haq, when he introduced the 'Sunni Deobandi' Islam in the region.¹¹ The first sectarian clash in Gilgit-Baltistan was in 1975, when a Shia *Muharrum* procession in Gilgit town was fired at from a Sunni mosque. Violence spread to many other areas when the Sunni cleric was taken into custody for inciting people. The next major clash took place in 1988, triggered by a dispute over the sighting of the moon to mark end of the month-long fasting of *Ramzan* and start of *Eid* festivities. Based on the declaration of the sighting of the moon by their religious leaders, the Shia community ended fasting and started celebrations while

the Sunni community was still fasting.¹² Due to this reason conflict between Shia and Sunni continued to till date. In these conflicts several hundreds were killed, villages were destroyed and even livestock were not spared while the administration watched the unfolding crisis like a mute spectator.¹³

The next major outbreak of violence occurred during 2003-04, when there was controversy over the introduction of a Sunni centric curriculum in the schools of G-B. Because of strident opposition, the federal government was compelled to take on board the Shia leaders and chart out a resolution to the problem. This, in turn, enraged the Sunni constituency, leading to the assassination of Shia religious leader, Zia ud-din-Rizvi, in January 2005. Sectarian sentiments at this point were raised considerably resulting in violence and eventual loss of life.¹⁴ Agha Ziauddin's death in January 2005 caused widespread clashes leading to a six-month long curfew and emergency, and loss of more than two hundred lives.¹⁵

In October 2005, the devastated earthquake badly affected the PoJK and it was embroiled in its own sectarian violence. On October 11, 2005, armed militant in the outskirts of Gilgit opened fire on a bus, killed one passenger and injured seven others. In year 2008, eighteen people were killed in sectarian violence, including the director of the agriculture department of Gilgit. However, 2009 again saw the incidents of sectarian violence. On April 20, 2009, Syed Asad Zaidi, the deputy speaker of the G-B (Northern Areas) Legislative Assembly was shot dead, along with his companion, in Kashrote, which is a Sunni-dominated neighborhood of Gilgit city.¹⁶ The Karakoram Highway, linking China to Pakistan, has become a major battleground in the sectarian strife. Traveling on this road is considered a nightmare. This all-weather road, stretching about 840 kilometers, runs through a predominantly Sunni area from Gilgit to Rawalpindi, where instances of firing on passenger buses have occurred several times. On February 28, 2012 when at least 18 innocent pilgrims belonging to Gilgit Baltistan were killed by unknown assailants. Those killed were part of a group returning from a pilgrimage to holy shrines in Iran. They were travelling in a convoy of four buses from Rawalpindi to Gilgit. The attack took place on the Karakoram Highway in Harban Nullah in Kohistan district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.¹⁷

The killings and counter-killings have become routine in the region and thousands of lives have been lost and unaccounted have suffered injuries in these sectarian clashes. The persisting culture of sectarian hatred has made the lives of those caught in the conflict miserable. There is a constant threat of being shot merely because of being born into a different sect in GB. Properties worth millions have been destroyed in the seemingly unending violence. Chronic conflict has also led to the disruption of even the minimal available infrastructure.¹⁸

A study conducted by European Foundation for South Asian Studies has adopted the stance that the military and the governments of Pakistan are responsible for the dynamics of sectarianism in G-B. It argued that Gilgit was a peaceful region since its initiation. The region remained peaceful during the proliferation of Islam even under colonial rule, but when Gilgit came under the control of Pakistan the sectarian strives increased. In G-B, the process of Islamization by the Pakistani state employed a 'divide-and-conquer' strategy, that strategy abetted the process of sectarianism that gradually altered the cultural heritage of G-B.¹⁹ Further, the sustenance of divide-and-conquer

tactics by successive administrations of Pakistan allowed the government to the militarization of G-B and refute the extension of basic human rights to its inhabitants.

Major Causes of the Sectarian Conflict and Human Rights Violation in Gilgit Baltistan

1. Theological difference between Shia, Sunni sects and there sub sects of Islam.
2. Pakistan's military dictator General Zia-ul-Haq's policies of radicle Islamization based on the Sunni ideology, which begins in the 1970s.
3. Promotion of madrassa education system by the government of Pakistan which promote radicalism.
4. The policy of the government of Pakistan to divide and rule the people on the bases of religious lines gave rise to sectarian conflict.
5. By changing the State Subject Rule by the Government of Pakistan, settling the people of the outsider in G -B and bringing demographic changes in the area.
6. Afghan Jihad and Islamic Revolution in Iran also fueled sectarian conflict and human rights exploitation in G-B.²⁰

Current Status of Gilgit- Baltistan

G-B has received sparse attention in informed circles. For more than six decades the area lacked not only a constitutional status but also even the modest demands of people such as a legal system respecting rights of the people and the provision of a system of self-governance remained unheard and have, on many occasion, been countered violently.²¹ Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order, 2009, which replaced the Northern Areas Legislative Council with the Legislative Assembly. The NALC was an elected body, but had no more than an advisory role to the Minister for Kashmir Affairs and Northern Areas.²² The so-called regional government is under the overall control of the federal Ministry of Kashmir Affairs and G-B in Islamabad. G-B or Northern Areas do not find any mention in the Pakistani constitution: it is neither independent, nor does it have provincial status. This helps Pakistan maintain ambiguity about the region, in the way it does with Pok. (L.K.Tomar. Gilgit- Baltistan: Aspiration for Identity, Integration & Autonomy, Surendera Publication, Delhi, 2020, p.11.) On November 1st 2020, Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan announced that his government would give the region “provisional provincial status”. When it happens, G-B will become the fifth province of Pakistan. Under 26th constitutional amendment Pakistan has finalised a law to award provisional provincial status to strategically located G-B. India maintains that Pakistan has no locus standi on Gilgit-Baltistan and that it has illegally and forcibly occupied the territory. Despite all this the saga of human right violation will not going to end until it is under Pakistani control.²³

Conclusion

The study clearly shows that sectarianism got triggered in 1977 when Zia-ul-Haq introduced religious reform in the country. This not only caused disputes between Sunni and Shia communities of G-B but also impeded the socio and economic development in the region. Sectarianism has since unfortunately become commonplace in G-B with innocent people falling victims to it routinely. The people of G-B undoubtedly feel alienated, frustrated and are not happy with the way they are being treated by the Pakistan government. They have been protesting for their due rights for a long time, but their voices have been silenced by referring to it as a part and parcel of the Kashmir issue. The people of G-B especially feel cheated and betrayed because POJK enjoys an autonomous status, but their state subject remains intact, and they have far more rights than them. The Pakistan government is using a completely different policy to deal with G-B as compared to POJK.

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