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**SECTARIAN DIVERSITY IN GILGIT BALTISTAN AND ROLE OF SUCCESSIVE
GOVERNMENTS IN RESOLVING THE CONFLICT AND IMPROVING HARMONY
WITHIN THE REGION**

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Abstract:

Sectarian strife in Gilgit-Baltistan is not a new issue. There is a long-established controversy in the region based on religious differences. Gilgit-Baltistan is home to many sects, including Shia, Sunni, and Ismaili which have been inhabited for centuries, but sectarian tensions rose in the 1970s and subsequent decades. In spite of the fact that there was no genuine encounter between various groups in Gilgit-Baltistan during the British rule, there were dormant partisan biases among the people. A few practices and mentalities among Sunni and Shia group that indicated expanding disdain for one another among typically moderate individuals in issues of religion. Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to examine the evolution of sectarianism in Gilgit Baltistan mainly after the independence of Pakistan in 1947. Moreover, the objective is to analyze the root causes and nature of sectarian strife in Gilgit-Baltistan. The questions raised in this study also comprise that how the sectarianism grew in the post-1947 division of India, and what is the nature of the conflict in the Gilgit region, and what efforts have been made by the Pakistani government and political elites to minimize sectarian conflict in the region. This research is primarily descriptive and analytical in nature and based on the critical review of existing literature on the issue of sectarianism in Gilgit-Baltistan.

Introduction

Pakistan has faced many conflicts since its independence in 1947. Democracy could not flourish and be rooted out through military acquisitions, political intrigues, conflicts in political parties, and lack of education at the level of people. But a very important factor that gripped Pakistan after the 1980s has been the question of sectarianism in certain parts of the country and Gilgit-Baltistan is one of those areas which witnessed sectarian conflict with its full intensity. As mentioned above, sectarianism in the region is not a fairly recent phenomenon. Ethnic sentiments that were buried under the carpet during the British period just emerged shortly after independence but efforts to manage the problem started in the early 1970s.

This paper is an attempt to examine the phenomenon of sectarianism in Gilgit Baltistan. It is important in many ways. As the China CPEC runs through it which has added the significance of this region so it becomes extremely important to study the factors that put Pakistan's strategic and security interests at risk. The study also aims to highlight the evolution and nature of sectarian conflict in the region and evaluates the initiatives of the federal government to resolve this issue. Though there may be an involvement of foreign elements to trigger this dilemma but this is not the focus of this research. The following paragraphs describe the demography of this region and provide us with a clear picture of the diversity and geography of that area. In the second part, we trace the history of the conflict mainly after 1947 (Hassan & Dzakiria, 2020)..



Figure 1: CPEC Passes through it. Source: (GK Today)

Introduction to the region and communities living in the Gilgit Baltistan region

Gilgit Baltistan is one of Pakistan's most spectacular areas in terms of scenic beauty. Geographically, it is situated in the three most magnificent mountain ranges in the world: Hindukush, Himalaya, and Karakorum which covers 72,971 square kilometers of land. It borders the territory of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to the west, Azad Kashmir to the east, China to the east and north-east, and Afghanistan to the north. This area has very fertile land and seasonal food production but has remained a hot topic of discussion due to sectoral problems, controversies, and social and political instability (Hassan & Aziz, 2019). This region is diverse in terms of language and culture. Almost 25 languages or different dialects are spoken by the native population (Bhattacharje, 2018). People lived in this region with cultural and religious harmony by the early twentieth century but in the current scenario, Gilgit Baltistan has been divided due to sectarian conflicts. Gilgit Baltistan has a multiparty system. Since Gilgit-Baltistan got the provincial status on executive lines, a smooth circle of political processes has been witnessed in Gilgit-Baltistan. First Pakistan Peoples' Party established their government and then power transferred to PML-N through the proper channel of the election, and in the next elections as well, smooth and transparent transfer of power through the election is expected.

Sectarian Community Profile Explained

The population of Gilgit Baltistan is around 2 million. It is divided into four groups in terms of their sectorial affiliations; Shia is 39 percent, Sunni is 27 percent, Ismaili 18 percent while 16% Noorbukshi of the total population. Ismailis are the third largest community of the total population (Hunzai, 2013). The roots of Sectarianism in Gilgit Baltistan could be traced soon after independence. However, there was no serious incident of sectarian violence occurred in the region before the late 1980s. In 1988, a dispute over the sighting of Eid ul Fitar Moon outbreaked between Shia Muslims and Sunni Muslims in Gilgit Baltistan (Dad, The News, 2017). Shia community is not satisfied with the governmental policies. They claim that the Government of Pakistan remained to fail to provide security to the Shia community in the country. Their point of view is that the Government of Pakistan has a soft corner for the Sunni population and provides more economic and political opportunities to them. Their grievances increased during the Zia Regime when the Islamization process was started by general Zia ul Haq which opened a new chapter of conflicts not only between Sunnis and Shiites but the gulf was widened between Barelvi and Deobandi (Hassan & Dzakiria, 2019). This dispute was further spread all over Pakistan. Sunni community members of Gilgit Baltistan also consider themselves affected by violence and conflicts. They are in minority in these areas and they are targeted by Shia members in target killing and bomb attacks. The Sunni population is of the view that Shia are in majority in Gilgit Baltistan for the last many decades and they are exploiting other community groups. Sunni members of this area feel neglected socially and economically by political leaders and religious leaders. They also blame the Government of Pakistan for not ensuring peace in the Gilgit Baltistan region (Aziz & Hassan, 2018).



Figure 2: Geographical map of Gilgit Baltistan. (GK Today)

A Succinct Review of the Existing Literature

The rich material is available on the issue of sectarianism in Gilgit-Baltistan. However, after consulting the bulk of the literature the found fact is that, on this particular issue, available literature can be divided in two categories in terms of their contents: literature that covers the Domestic reasons and root causes of sectarianism in Gilgit-Baltistan; literature that covers the involvement of external factor in sectarianism in this region. The review of selected literature is given here. Feyyaz (2015) described in his article that before Indo-Pak independence, there was less space for the promotion of sectarian conflicts, because at that time there were conflicts between the two distinct nations that were Hindus and Muslims. Identification of sects and sub-sects, the association of people in those sects was considered a personal matter. Before independence Muslims were recognized as one nation, they had many common traditions and the values of each sect were respected by the other. After independence, local religious leaders, peers, and spiritual leaders of respective Sects started to divide the less-educated people into groups to gain their own motives. Because the less-educated people in communities were easy to be misguided on the name of Islam. On the other hand, the government was failed to build harmony in the country, and the interests of the common man were crushed badly for the personal benefits of sectarian leaders and local politicians (Feyyaz, 2015). Yousif (2012) claimed that sectarian violence aggravated during the Zia regime. He pointed out that certain legislations and policies of former President General Zia-ul-Haq (1977 to 1988) were aimed at Islamization in Pakistan which triggered sectarian violence between Sunnis and the Shia population of Pakistan particularly in the region of Gilgit Baltistan. For example, in 1980 Zia-ul-Haq imposed Zakat and Usher tax ordinance which was opposed by the Shia population and for the first time around 100,000 people of the Shias community marched towards the federal secretariat in Islamabad to force the government to take its decision back. This incident also provoked hard-liner

followers of the Sunni sect. Such kind of incidents was also reported many times between Deobandi and Barelvis. Approximately Deobandi account for 20 percent and Barelvis identify 50% of Pakistan's population. He asserted that Pakistan is the 2nd largest country in the world with a Shias population after Iran and widespread threatened of sectarian conflict in the Pakistan and region (Yusuf, 2012). Azam (2014) described in his article that the clashes between Sunni and Shias were not handled well by the governments of Pakistan. After the first massacre in Gilgit - Baltistan in 1988, the political leaders failed to combat sectarian conflicts. Even the ex-president of Pakistan Asif Ali Zardari (the most diplomatic political leader) did not play a dynamic role to mitigate the Shia-Sunni conflicts, although his party was ruling in Gilgit at that time. The peoples also complained that the role of media is also biased when they report any sectarian conflict in the Gilgit-Baltistan region. He further claimed that the overall performance of the successive regimes to resolve the sectarian conflict in Gilgit-Baltistan met with failure (Azam, 2014). Dad (2015) narrates that sectarian conflicts arose in this region from 1979 during the era of General Zia-ul-Haq. He allowed the opening of Karakoram Bypass and route between Western China and Pakistan which provided the base for conflicts among the sectoral groups (Dad, The News, 2015). Dad (2016) in another study concluded that the efforts of nationalists are to define Gilgit-Baltistan as a unified part of Kashmir, while regional and ethnic groups of Gilgit Baltistan assert their unique identity distinguished from Kashmir within the region. On contrary, Kashmiri leadership and the Pakistani state attempts to create a unified identity of Gilgit Baltistan and Kashmir to counter the Indian position (Dad, 2016). Anwar (2019) explains the geostrategic importance of the Gilgit Baltistan in the region. It is a wide mountaineer area in the extreme north of Pakistan. The total area of Gilgit-Baltistan is about 72,496 km. For the purpose of administration, it has been divided into ten districts i.e., Gilgit, Diamer, Hunza, Nagar, Ghanche, Ghizer, Skardu, Shiger, Kharmang and Astore. The significance of the area is evident from its geographical location as it is situated at the juncture of Central Asia, China and South Asia (Anwar, 2019). Butt (2014) has reviewed the ethnic diversity of Gilgit-Baltistan. He claimed that the inability of resident diverse communities of Gilgit-Baltistan to form associations among themselves is the main cause of diversity and sectarian conflicts. And the reason behind this diversity is the diverse political interests of each ethnic group. The diverse ethnic communities of Gilgit-Baltistan with diverse interests and goals are unable to come to the same page which resultantly ensues in collective inaction (Butt, 2014). Rizwan (2018) studied the sectarian conflicts in Gilgit-Baltistan, he described that 100,000 Shia community members organized a March for protest in front of the Federal Secretariat, Islamabad. Their agenda was to turn back these enforced decisions which are only in favor of the Sunni sect, which shows the intolerance of other sects in Gilgit-Baltistan. In Pakistan, there are many sects, but major conflicts always remained between Shia and Sunni while other sects remained supplementary supporters to these major sects. In Pakistan, the conflicts of Deobandi and Barelvi sub-sects are also prominent. These groups mostly perceived as extremists for their religion and acted aggressively to implement the rules they follow themselves (Rizwan, 2018). Lambah (2016) describes that There are three major sectarian groups in Gilgit and

Baltistan including Ismailis, Shia, and Sunnis. Before the 1970s all the groups and sects were living in the region very peacefully and have a strong relationship. As per the author first major conflict was reported during Moharram. Moon sighting in 1998 was the second major incident in the area that caused series of conflicts. Till 2014 residents of this belt lose their lives in conflicts and attacks (Lambah, 2016). According to study conducted by PILDAT (2015) Gilgit Baltistan is politically administered by GBLA (Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly) whose members are elected through the general election. Most mainstream Pakistani parties have branches in the Northern Areas and are represented in the GBLA. Members are elected to party in these regions in the 1970s that anarchy began. First, authorities abrogated the State Subject Rule, the law that until then protected the local demographic composition, and encouraged Pakistani Sunnis to settle in Gilgit town. This government-sponsored settlement scheme damaged the social fabric and provoked religious feuds that continue to simmer. It is consequently contended that the origins of the Sunni-Shia conflicts in Gilgit lie in the effects on the existing social order of the population movements associated with a partition, Pakistani government policies, and regional politics (PILDAT, 2015). Izhar (2013) analyzes the strict policies of General Zia-ul-Haq towards Shias. He claimed that Zia-ul-Haq bolstered a specific variant of Islam and set a new standard for the religious practices in Pakistan, which rose the differences between the sects of Shias and Sunni and the sectarianism got strength in Gilgit-Baltistan. Zia-ul-Haq formulated the oppressing rules for Gilgit-Baltistan. Ironically, the later administrations also continued to practice these oppressing rules, rather than, dismiss them. While despite such incidents and policies, the geostrategic significance of Gilgit-Baltistan on the account of the territorial and nearby international and social elements had increased (Izhar, 2013). Mahsood (2017) articulates the views about the increasing role of religious clergies in sectarianism. Generally, the ulema didn't have a significant space in the government sector. Their jobs were constrained to the private circles. Zia's strict policies for Shias living in Gilgit-Baltistan gave a chance to the ulema to get their government jobs. This period viewed, that the practices of mushrooming of theological schools and implementation of such educational plans that proliferated a specific form of sectarianism are common in Pakistan (Mahsood, 2017). Bhattacharaya (2014) while examining the importance of the Gilgit-Baltistan, he described that the route of Karakoram opened in 1979 which connects Western China with Pakistan. It exposed the hitherto of exogenous lifestyles, market forces, and ideas to a relatively isolated region of Gilgit-Baltistan. The interface between Gilgit-Baltistan and the rest of Pakistan is crucial to understand the local sectarian politics and violence. The Islamization procedures of Zia was welcomed by Sunni pioneers because they thought that it could protect their Sunni associations from the Shias (Bhattacharya, 2014). Hunzai (2013) believes that the overturn of physical isolation of Gilgit-Baltistan in the region ushered in a new era of economic opportunities. The Karakoram highway actually increased the vulnerability of Gilgit-Baltistan to new threats of the influx of illegal weapons, drugs, and intolerant attitudes from the south. It changed the demographics of Gilgit and other towns. That is why the years of the early 1980s are considered significant to impact the sectarian milieu in Gilgit-Baltistan. In addition to local and national

factors, there was an international dimension that contributed to sectarianism in Gilgit-Baltistan. In the 1980s, Pakistan turned into the turf for a battle between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Hunzai, 2013). A report published in PILDAT clarifies that Pakistan took over complete control of Gilgit-Baltistan in November 1947. For considerable time subsequently, the constitutional status of Gilgit remained undefined; in effect which continued until the declaration of Gilgit-Baltistan empowerment and its Self-Governance Order, 2009 by Pakistan People Party Government. Consequently, facing political instability and vacuum, masses in the northern areas could not be considered well organized on the political lines. This, however, made easier their division and organization on a sectarian basis. Over the next years, the Shia-Sunni division became firmly established. The history of the ongoing sectarian violence in the Gilgit region dates back to the 1950s and 1970s when the religious leaders of Shia and Sunni sects started a campaign of mutual invective. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (a democratically elected ex-Prime Minister Pakistan), made major administrative changes. In 1974, he abolished the FCR and agency system along with the rule of a hereditary prince (PILDAT, 2015). Kohli (2004) pointed out in his article that federal systems vary in their capacity to resolve ethnic conflicts. He argued that "more a formal federal system operates in practices as a unitary system, the less is system's capacity to accommodate ethnic and territorial cleavages" (Kohli, 2004). So, according to him if political power is highly centralized then it cannot effectively address the ethnic issues because at many points these issues could only be resolved through devolution of power while system resist it. Mushtaq (2009) analyzed that Pakistan has faced crucial problems in the management of ethnic diversity. It has faced a violent secessionist movement in 1971 on ethnic lines which resulted in the creation of Bangladesh. Even in post-1971, Pakistan witnessed insurgencies and separate movements on ethnic lines. He argued that a centralized pattern of governance has marginalized certain communities, in reaction; they have mobilized to seek power on ethnic lines. So, it is suggested by the author that decentralization and inclusive governance is the way forward for Pakistan to cope with ethnicity (Mushtaq, 2009). 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 Gilgit-Baltistan. 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 Gilgit-Baltistan, 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 Gilgit-Baltistan. The study emphasized that "contemporary conflict dynamics in Gilgit-Baltistan are not rooted in inherent sectarian alienation, but they are triggered by the exploitation, intensification, and politicization of sectarian fault lines by the Pakistani military establishment. Further, the sustenance of divide-and-conquer tactics by successive administrations, allowed the government to the militarization of Gilgit-Baltistan and refute the extension of basic human rights to its inhabitants"(EFSAS, 2020). Mishra (2019) pointed out that Shia Muslims are in majority in Gilgit-Baltistan but they feel marginalized in comparison to Sunni-minority because Sunni Muslims

was backed by the government of Pakistan in 1980 during the Zia regime. He also highlights the other aspects of sectarianism in the region. According to him Shia led Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, Zia ul Haqq's policy to join Afghan Jihad in 1980s, construction of Karakorum Highway which connects China with Pakistan and poor economic condition contributed to developed sectarianism in Gilgit-Baltistan (Mishra V. K., 2019). Waseem (2010) in his book has analyzed that the factors that made the governments of Pakistan and the military unable to resolve the sectarian violence and conflicts in Gilgit-Baltistan are the people/resident of the region. Their division in different sects is responsible to abet the ethnic diversity. He further suggests that it is necessary for the government to play on dual fronts by using a two-pronged policy regarding administrative and military powers, "to handle the violent situation in Gilgit-Baltistan, the government must use force to control anti-state elements and supporting the region economically to appease the public" (Waseem, 2010). Martin Sokefeld (2014) in his article "Anthropology of Gilgit-Baltistan, Northern Pakistan" described the pattern of traditional political system in Gilgit-Baltistan. He pointed out that politically society is based on centralized and non-centralized political organizations. Further, the participation in political organizations is also based on sectarian lines (Sokefeld, 2014). Bhattacharjee (2015) presented her point of view about the conflicts in Gilgit-Baltistan and clarified that the local people valued more their ethnic or tribal identity than their sectarian affiliation. Sectarian violence is a state weapon and in the case of Gilgit-Baltistan, it had increased after the initiation of the Karakoram Highway between China and Pakistan. She has looked at the issue in Indian perspective, so she took a stance that China considered Gilgit-Baltistan as its "core-area" for its development, similarly India considered Kashmir as its 'core-area', so it will never be ready to resolve the Kashmir issue (Bhattacharjee, 2015). This study proves the existence and involvement of external (Indian) factor in Gilgit-Baltistan. It also articulates the fact that India has intentions to combat and counter China in the region and can intervene to provoke the sectarian conflicts in Gilgit-Baltistan. Holden (2019) analyzed the evolution of the constitutional and political conflicts in Gilgit-Baltistan due to sectarian divisions. She claimed that in recent years, religious and sectarian diversity increased rapidly in Gilgit-Baltistan. This article further explores the political and economic consequences of Gilgit-Baltistan after the construction of Basha Dam and China- Pakistan Economic Corridor (CEPEC) projects. She proposed to 'de-colonize' the anthropology of Gilgit-Baltistan with the help of native scholars through the promotion of cultural expertise. Because she thinks that old natives can perform better to reform their social-political setups (Holden, 2019). Singh (2019) pointed out that in Gilgit-Baltistan state-sponsored terrorism and violence are the actual cause of the backwardness of the region. He said that Gilgit-Baltistan is still a backward region with worsening trends of brutal assimilation shows the pathetic views of the governments in Gilgit-Baltistan and Islamabad. CPEC will not bring economic prosperity but the vulnerabilities for the people of Pakistan and Gilgit-Baltistan will be increased (Singh, 2019). This article presents Indian perspective on the matter of sectarianism in Gilgit-Baltistan. Bouzas, Orient, and Berlin (2017) define the difficulties in the process of territorialization and representation due to the sectarian

division in the region. However, they are convinced that the sectarian division and violence will no longer be a part of Gilgit-Baltistan's legacy. They called it the "Jewel of Pakistan", due to its trans-regional status and the best place for tourism with minimum sectarian violence in Gilgit. He claimed that after CPEC, there emerged many sub-identities due to the trans-regional exchange of cultural norms in the Gilgit-Baltistan, and it will be helpful to reduce and gradually eradicate the sectarianism in the region (Antía Mato Bouzas, 2017). Beg, Baig, and Khan (2018) have described that economic independence is always helpful to mitigate socio-political conflicts and enhanced regional integration. CPEC will also be helpful to reduce the ethnic and sectarian conflicts of the Gilgit-Baltistan and further strengthen the process of regional integration. Because this project mainly focused on the people-centric growth model this ensures the human security (Ms. Saadia Beg, 2018).

Conclusion:

It is concluded from the existing review of literature that most of the literature available on sectarian violence in Gilgit Baltistan region confined their inquiry to discover the starting point of sectarian strife in the region dates back to the 1950s and 1970s when the religious leaders of Shia and Sunni sects started a campaign of mutual invective. According to previous studies sectarianism got triggered in 1977 when Zia-ul-Haq introduced religious reform in the country. It not only caused dispute between Sunni and Shia community of Gilgit Baltistan but also impeded the socio and economic development in the region. Neither any political party nor Government of Pakistan placed this issue on top priority to resolve the conflicts. In such studies, Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization policy is discussed in isolation while other domestic and external factors such as the impact of Islamic revolution in Iran, Russian invasion in Afghanistan, China's decision to join global economy and Indian involvement factors due to Kashmir dispute are neglected. So, these studies gave a narrow vision to understand the actual phenomena. While there is other type of literature that highlighted the external and internal both dynamics that contributed in sectarian strife in Gilgit-Baltistan but they could not grasp the objective realities involved in the under-discussion phenomena. They just criticized the central government of Pakistan and Pakistani military, but none of them try to investigate the reason behind the limitations of the Pakistani government that was entangled with the bipolar world dynamics for its survival. Some anthropological studies on Gilgit-Baltistan describes that People in this region are living here from centuries with social harmony in the region. After independence political parties and local key notable of the area did not ensure political and religious stability in the area and as a result during last three decades of past century and first decade of current century sectarian disputes and conflicts has risen in the region.

Some other studies discussed that in this region, religious political parties have their hold and network their leaders must take lead to minimize misunderstanding among people of different group and try to bridge the gaps among all groups. These religious parties are gaining number of followers and in actual promoting conflicts in the area. Leaders of both the sects blame each other and held them responsible

for the conflicts and losses of lives. They all consider themselves on right track and true representative of the area. There is need to step forward for peace and develop a common way for development of Pakistan. It is prime duty of the government to take responsibility of all citizens and ensure their rights regardless of any sect.

However, this paper find out that government's strategies in last seven years to counter sectarian violence are neglected and there is a room empty for research on the affectivities on such plans i.e., ongoing economic and political development after CEPEC , tourism, National action plan (policy to counter violence and terrorism in the society) and the policy of decentralization (executive provincial status is granted to the region for that purpose) and the inclusion of external factors involvement in sectarianism in Gilgit-Baltistan. Along with it, overall, the state of Pakistan has taken many steps to counter, sectarian radicalization in countrywide. Pakistan in last few years has taken several steps to curtail radicalization in Pakistan. For instance:

1. It started operation 'Zarb-e-Azab' against proscribed militant groups in border areas of KPK and Baluchistan.
2. Constitutionally merged the FATA in the province of KPK to normalize the radicalization in those areas through economic and infrastructure development (physical and legal), it will also help to curtail the no go areas in Pakistan.
3. Made a National action plan to counter terrorism.
4. Recently, Pakistan has passed many laws pertaining to anti- terrorism under FATF obligation.

As far as the Gilgit-Baltistan is concerned this paper concludes that the increasing sectarian conflicts in the Gilgit-Baltistan could be managed well through the inclusion of local people and institutions in the political proceedings. The rationale thought behind this is that local people have more understanding about the weak points of different sects. Therefore, they are more capable to make the move regarding the decline on sectarian lines in Gilgit-Baltistan. Governments must include Gilgit-Baltistan in the process of nation-building and must enhance its influence in the region. The government must enhance the state-regulated and state-controlled capacity of local institutions to compensate the deprivations of sects, democratic deficit, and further to avoid any serious external threats. The region can be transformed, if the cultural specialties will be promoted by the native cultural experts. The native experts can proliferate the ideas of territorial affiliation rather than sectarian affiliations. Their attention must draw towards the material benefits after their unity. The region will be able to produce more economic opportunities and industry of tourism which a strong industry in Gilgit-Baltistan can flourish better after the complete peace in Gilgit-Baltistan. Moreover, the culture of tolerance for other sects must be promoted among the locals.

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