

# *State, Religion and Culture in Gilgit-Baltistan*

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State, culture and religion are major factors whose interaction influences and shapes the character of a society. When examining the interaction between state, culture, and religion in society, and their cumulative influence on it one has to take into consideration the complex nature of the interaction. Analyzing the function of each aspect in isolation presents a fragmentary picture of a complex social phenomenon. The society functions properly when state, culture and religion interact in harmony. Disharmony in interaction results in intellectual poverty, cultural stagnation, and parochial attitudes on the one hand, and alienation of the masses from prevalent economic, political, and religious issues on the other. Thus, to analyze the interaction between culture, state and religion it is imperative to take into account the interaction between these three elements.

The case of Gilgit-Baltistan presents a picture of disharmonious interaction between state, religion, and culture. Here at times the interaction between these factors is characterized by the hegemony of one factor over the others. This research paper attempts to identify the loci where disharmony and resultant clashes stem from, and examines the implications of a discordant interaction of state, religion and culture on the society of Gilgit-Baltistan. I am using harmony in Platonic sense with a modification. In the Republic Socrates defines justice as harmonious functioning of society as a whole where different classes work in their own spheres without interfering in the areas that do not belong to them. To illustrate his concept of harmony in the state Socrates resorts to theoretical example of justice in the soul where spirited, rational and appetitive parts function in harmony to establish justice in the soul. After elucidating it, he extrapolates this analogy to the state. I appropriated Platonic idea of harmony. Instead of using Plato's categories at conceptual level the essay posits culture, religion and state as major factors in establishing harmony in the society. In this essay culture, state and religion are used both at theoretical and objective level.

My main argument is that the geographical dismemberment of Gilgit-Baltistan resulted in cultural disintegration. At this juncture sectarian parties came forward to fill the gap and marginalized the culture of Gilgit-Baltistan. In this situation the state abetted religious elements and succeeded to suppress the nationalist parties of the area who claim to represent culture based politics. The result of heteronomy of religion over culture and ethnicity is disharmony in society in the shape of sectarianism violence, proliferation of mafias and confrontation of nationalists with the state.

The geographical proximity of Gilgit-Baltistan to India, China, Afghanistan and Tajikistan makes it strategically the most sensitive part of Pakistan. Though the region neighbors Central and South Asia, it is not integral part of the history of these

neighboring regions. Until the last decades of nineteenth century the inaccessibility of Gilgit-Baltistan kept it immune from the major historical developments and upheavals of the neighboring polities. Historically, Gilgit-Baltistan comprised of different princely states scattered in mountainous valleys stretching from Chitral to Tibet. With the advent of the British Empire the local rulers of the area became familiar with the modern concept of state.

In order to consolidate the imperial grip over the far-flung areas of Gilgit-Baltistan, the British administration separated Chitral from Gilgit-Baltistan and annexed it to Malakand agency in 1896. It initiated the process of dismantling the geographical boundaries of Gilgit-Baltistan that ultimately led to its cultural and social disintegration. In addition, the geo-political developments and demarcation of boundaries between different regions of the surrounding areas during the first half of twentieth century furthered the geographical mutilation of Gilgit-Baltistan and deprived it of Ladakh, Daras, Guraz and Kargil. The geographical mutilation of different parts of Gilgit-Baltistan cut these areas off from the mainstream culture, and reduced the religious and cultural diversity of the area. This ahistorical and unrealistic geographical demarcation of the area brought about a gradual cultural dissipation and absorption of the fragmented cultural units within alien cultures of the regions that do not share historical and cultural commonalities with Gilgit-Baltistan. Furthermore, an indifferent political decision on the part of the ruling elite of both Pakistan and India contributed to the absence of free interaction and communication between the segregated areas that share a common cultural heritage.

Segregation of the various parts of Gilgit-Baltistan through apathetic political decision making impoverished the traditional cultural essence and made Ladakh, Kargil, Darass and Chitral vulnerable to the domineering forces of other cultures. For instance, after the absorption of Chitral into the Malakand agency, Chitrali society underwent marked changes. This process gained momentum when Bhutto stooped to the demands of the religious parties, and, especially, when General Zia introduced his brand of Islam in Pakistan - informed by his political interests and expediencies. There had been sects of varying beliefs such as Kaffirs of Kalash and Buddhists in Ladakh who enrich the cultural tapestry of Gilgit-Baltistan.

Geographical and cultural mutilation led to radical transformation of Chitrali society and culture. Prior to its dismemberment from mainstream culture, Chitrali society was diverse and tolerant, containing the minority of Kalashies or Kafirs - an epithet popularized by religious parties. Kalashies have been practicing their religious and cultural rituals for more than two millennia. Now their very existence is threatened by the growing intolerance fostered by religious parties. These parties espouse the Taliban brand of Islam. Their version of Islam is based partly on the fundamentalist ideology, and to a great extent embedded in the cultural practices of the majority ethnic group where local cultural and tribal practices find expressions in the guise of religion. Religious parties utilize Islam to exterminate minorities by declaring them as Kafirs and converting them, under duress, to Islam - a religion that clearly states that “[there is] no compulsion in religion”. A careful perusal of the hidden agenda of the religious parties

divulges that Islam is employed as a ploy on the part of the religious leadership to garner economic benefits for the people who are not inhabitants of Chitral. In such a situation it is extremely difficult to sift Pashtun cultural and tribal customs from purely religious injunctions and practices.

There were many other internal and external factors which gave rise to sectarian strife through the radicalization of the hitherto tolerant multi sectarian and ethnic society of Pakistan in general and Gilgit-Baltistan in particular. With the inception of the Afghan war in General Zia's era, the state propagated the role of Islam as a determining political force in the establishment of Pakistan. This view, however, had nothing to do with the democratic Islam envisioned by Quaid-e-Azam. On the contrary, it was a version of Islam enunciated by radical groups who were waging jihad against the very secular forces who championed the mission of Quaid-e-Azam to transform Pakistan into a secular democracy. When Quaid-e-Azam was leading Pakistan movement the religious parties of India vehemently opposed the creation of a separate homeland for the Muslims of India.

After the demise of Quaid, the religious forces permeated into the process of statecraft and influenced the framing of the constitution of the nascent state - Pakistan. Thus, since its inception the ideology of Pakistan was hijacked and distorted by religious parties for their parochial political gains. These groups had been struggling to enter into power, but failed to win popular support due to presence of syncretic Islam in most parts of Pakistan. It was only during Zia's regime that the obscurantist forces made inroads into state intuitions to determine the political course of action. With the support of general Zia they succeeded in distorting the ideology of Pakistan reducing it to a political agenda that could easily fit into their myopic view of Islam.

Concomitantly, the Soviet incursion into Afghanistan, and Iran-Iraq war left indelible imprints on the social fabric of Pakistan. Afghan jihad nurtured radical/.militant version of Islam in Pakistan. Although, the Iran-Iraq war was confined within the geographical boundaries, their ideological war spilled over into different parts of the Muslim world including the far-flung areas of Gilgit-Baltistan. Iran-Iraq was, to great extent, an Arab-Persian conflict incognito, but it trickled down into the perception of Gilgit-Baltistani society as a religious one. On the global level the decade of eighties was also dominated by the struggle between the radical regime of Iran and conservative monarchy of Saudi Arabia (supporter of Iraqi government) who helped in the mushrooming of different groups sympathetic to their ideology of Islam. Bryan S. Turner writes "[w]hile Tehran attempted to export its revolution abroad, conservative governments in Egypt, Pakistan, the Gulf and Malaysia sought both to encourage Muslim radicals in their struggles against communism and to contain Islamism through co-operation and concessions, primarily over the role of religious law (the Shari'a)."

Proponents of both Iran and Saudi Arabia widened the sectarian division of the Pakistani society by extending monetary assistance to different sectarian groups, and in some cases military training. In Afghan war Zia-ul-Haq assisted the mujahideens. Jihadi ideas turned Pakistan into a recruiting ground for the Afghan jihad, endorsed and fought

by various religious schools of thought. As a result Pakistan became a guinea pig for the experimentation of Islam propagated by various religious groups supported by foreign Muslim states. These developments exposed sectarian groups to an exotic interpretation of local issues that in turn caused shifting of loyalties in favour of the centres outside their homeland, Pakistan. Because of its peculiar sectarian composition the shift is palpable in the society of Gilgit-Baltistan.

Pakistan is the first country in history that came into being on the basis of ideology. The predicament for an ideological state is that it lacks the historical and ethnic background to reinforce national identity. Ideology cannot be circumscribed in physical boundaries. That is why the ideological state cherry picks only those parts of history that are compatible with its ideology of nation. Lack of historical boundaries has produced a dilemma in the Pakistani society about its historical roots, and produced a sense of gap in historical continuity. In order to resolve this dilemma Pakistani society has adopted different but distinct approaches. Ethnic groups, who trace their roots to the ancient history of their respective group, represent the first approach. Religious groups, who support Islam and find their roots in Islamic history with Arabia as the centre, form the second approach. The later approach further bifurcates at the sectarian level where each sect has established its ideological center outside the country. The foreign centers cater to the religious, ideological and monetary needs of religious groups so that they can disseminate their ideas in society at the expense of ethnic group or local culture. Because of this, religious parties and nationalists are always at dagger drawn with each other.

In the confrontation between religious and ethnic groups the state favors religious discourse because, in the absence of a single ethnicity, religion is instrumental for the ruling elite to create unity in the multiethnic society of Pakistan. For their deviation from the center in search of identity the nationalists can be categorized as centrifugal forces. Instead of understanding nationalist movements the state deems them as detrimental to the federation. Therefore, the state suppresses nationalist ideas and prefers religious parties. Preference to religious discourse is Hobson choice for the ruling class of Pakistan, because it fears that if it allows nationalist tendencies to thrive then they will play havoc with the ideology of the state and consequently its existence. In such a situation Islam proved conducive to the state to unite and accommodate heterogeneous cultural groups within the state-defined ideology of Pakistan. Departure from the state dictated ideology and reverting to one's culture in search of identity is tantamount to be a revolt against the state, and by the same token rejection of Islam. This outlook has generated chronic tension between the state and peripheral cultural groups. Sometimes the repressive approach towards nationalists by the state can have fatal consequences to its sovereignty. The revolt of Bengalis against Pakistan is a case in point. It is an instance of Bengalis reverting to their roots or culture that is older than the ideological history of the Pakistani State and Islam.

The aforementioned analysis has been presented to illustrate the situation of Gilgit-Baltistan vis-à-vis other parts of Pakistan. The cultural disintegration of Gilgit-Baltistan has resulted in a cultural incommunicado between different sub-cultural groups of the region. In the wake of cultural disintegration religious groups seized the

opportunity to fill this void in the region's culture and succeeded in bringing about a shift in cultural based identity to religious based identity. In this process the people of Gilgit-Baltistan dissociate themselves from their historical roots and culture, and establish affinities with exogenous centers of their respective sects. Though people physically live in Gilgit-Baltistan, ideologically they are denizens of the centres outside the area and country.

One cannot deny the possibility of the interaction of Gilgit-Baltistan with other cultures. The objective is to identify the invisible hegemony of state ideology and exogenous cultures over the indigenous culture of Gilgit-Baltistan. As far as religion is concerned it is a part of the culture, but problems arise when the religious part attempts to dominate the whole culture. As a corollary creativity comes to an end, culture becomes stagnant and ultimately disintegrates. Stagnancy halts healthy and stifles the creative activities of culture, like music, dance, literature, and art. Thus, society becomes parochial in its outlook towards every sphere of life and gives way to unhealthy attitudes. Overemphasis on religion has begotten sectarianism in Gilgit-Baltistan's society. Due to this, the society suffers from the ills of sectarian strife and lacks intellectuals and torchbearers who, with political acumen and intellectual vision, could emancipate the masses from the clutches of exploitative groups and noxious forces of religious hatred.

On the historical and cultural level, the state is also contributing to the cultural disintegration of Gilgit-Baltistan and alienation of masses from the state. Absence of a syllabus that could accommodate the history and tradition of different cultural and religious groups of our country is a perfect metaphor for the failure of the state to assimilate different cultural groups under its notion of the Pakistani nation and Islam. Indifference of the establishment towards Gilgit-Baltistan can easily be gauged from the fact that these areas do not have any representation in the history syllabus of the country. Absence of Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistani historiography stems from the area's absence in the history of the freedom movement of Pakistan. The people of these areas attained independence with indigenous support and leadership.

There is no doubt about the significant role played by Quaid-e-Azam and Allama Iqbal in inspiring the Muslims of India to attain freedom, but neither the thoughts of Allama Iqbal, nor the leadership of Quaid-ed-Azam had any direct influence on the freedom movement of Gilgit-Baltistan. In other words these eminent figures are not part and parcel of the historical memory and experience of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan. That is why both leaders appear as alien figures in the historical memory and experience of the masses of Gilgit-Baltistan. The dissimilarity of a different historical context is evident from the commemoration of Independence Day of Gilgit-Baltistan on 1<sup>st</sup> November every year where people celebrate the Independence of Gilgit-Baltistan from the tyrannical rule of the Dogra Raj. On the other side their celebration of 14<sup>th</sup> August with equal fervor bears a testimony of their loyalty and being a part of modern Pakistan. It suggests the anomalous status of Gilgit-Baltistan in the history of Pakistan, and confusion regarding the historical perception of the area as well as nation

Unfortunately, the state is apathetic towards the historical tradition of Gilgit-Baltistan. Instead of accommodating historical memories and heroes of the area in history the state imposes ideals and heroes who are part of different historical time and space. People of the area are denied representation in every walk of life including the right of suffrage. Even in 21<sup>st</sup> century the people of Gilgit-Baltistan do not have representation in parliament, which would help them to become stakeholders in power and accommodate their particular regional identity in the mainstream society of Pakistan. Their identity has been lost owing to the expediencies of the state, selfishness of local politicians and the apathy of the establishment towards the people and culture of Gilgit-Baltistan.

In the educational curriculum the students of Gilgit-Baltistan do not find a material pertinent to their history and culture. They read the state dictated ideology and heroes in books with a detachment typical of an outsider. It is an arduous task for students to develop attachment to history and historical figures who are foreign to their collective historical memory. Thus, they raise question as to why they have been neglected by the state. Due to the lack of political consciousness the first generation of post-independence Gilgit-Baltistan was not cognizant of the gloomy socio-economic and political affairs of the area. With the passage of time the new generation realized the economic and social backwardness of the area. They resent the deprivation of the area. Resentment and grievance sometimes cross the boundaries of law and order and culminate in confrontation between the state and masses. In the confrontation the disgruntled youth enacts a crucial role by infusing revolutionary fervor into the moribund politics of Gilgit-Baltistan, yet they lack leaders who can harness their energies towards real issues with clear political objectives. The tragedy with the people of Gilgit-Baltistan is that the local nationalist leaders are bereft of the political acumen to gain ground in the political arena. Bereft of insight, the nationalist leaders just import stereotype strategies of nationalists from other regions of the country. Eventually their policies end in smoke, for the imported strategies are incompatible with local realities.

Furthermore, the purblind nationalist leaders lack intellectual understanding of cultural symbols and history. Thereby, they failed to employ them in order to inspire masses for political mobilization. Instead of producing an objective history of Gilgit-Baltistan from the perspective of insider, the so-called indigenous historians and nationalist ideologues tailor history to fulfill their ad hoc interests. It sometimes results in absurd notions and fictitious accounts about the historical name of the Gilgit-Baltistan and its origin as a nation. The entrance of the spearheads of freedom movement in the historiography of Gilgit-Baltistan has aggravated the situation. The military men turned historians have failed to produce a unanimous account of the history explaining the context and conditions that triggered the war of independence in 1947. They are more concerned with cultivating personality cults by reducing objective history to an epic of their heroism partly to turn the whole historical process in their favour.

It is the absence of unanimity among nationalist parties about political status of the area, and projection of subjective and fictitious versions of the freedom movement onto the map of history by the leaders of freedom movement that paved the way for

hijacking of the history of Gilgit-Baltistan by neighboring regions and foreigners. Equally the dearth of unanimity is also responsible for snatching feathers of independence from the caps of indigenous heroes of the freedom movement of Gilgit-Baltistan and embellishing them on the caps of pseudo heroes. Consigning local historical figures and leadership, such as Colonel Hassan Khan, to the dustbin of history and honouring Major Brown as the real architect of freedom movement, usurpation of Basha Dam's royalty by NWFP and declaring Gilgit-Baltistan as a cultural part of Kashmir well illustrate the cases in point.

During the last decade of twentieth century Gilgit-Baltistan witnessed dominance of different interest groups in politics. There is no denying the fact that the formation of interest groups is an integral part of the democratic process. What is objectionable is the illegal status of different interest groups. By illegal we mean that these groups rally not on real issues but to protect their illegal activities and businesses. According to sociologist Ferdinand Toennies, *gemeinschaft* or traditional societies tend to dissolve and give way to the extension of *gesellschaft* association. The most important characteristic of *gemeinschaften* association is that the solidarity of community is not based on a convergence of interest but based on kinship and organic ties, and have a moral cohesion often founded on common sentiment, whereas *gesellschaften* is based on a convergence of interests of different associations and groups.

Although the traditional society of Gilgit-Baltistan has undergone drastic changes under the influence of modernity, it does not follow the pattern described by Toennies. The transformation of the society neither begot nationalism nor *gesellschaft* associations. Rather, it gave birth to groups whose illegal activities forestalled the emergence of a strong civil society. Instead of vying for legitimate interests within the sphere of civil society, these groups further their interests and grip over society by greasing the palms of the bureaucracy and the Ministry of Kashmir and Northern Areas Affairs.

Since the national parties at Pakistan level have access to the executive of the country, interest groups and mafias have become in charge of these parties in Gilgit-Baltistan. Through the medium of national parties they safeguard their interest and extract concessions from the center for personal benefit by becoming apparent stakeholders in power. Moreover, the state, with the help of bureaucratic manipulations, succeeded in keeping nationalist parties at bay from legislation and executive, and divided society on sectarian lines. That is why we see an emerging pattern in the area where unemployed and disgruntled youths join nationalist forces at the regional level, and "interest groups" climb on the bandwagon of national parties operating at country level. In order to safeguard their vested interest these groups and mafias entered into an alliance with the bureaucracy, for bureaucracy is de facto legislature, judiciary and executive in Gilgit-Baltistan. The elected members of so-called Northern Areas Legislative Council (NALC) are merely rubber stamps of the bureaucracy. The impotency of Council can be better judged by the fact that chief secretary, a bureaucrat appointed by federal government, revokes NALC's passed resolutions with a single stroke of the pen. Ironically, members of NALC concede to bureaucratic dictation just

only to secure their personal benefits and the vested interest of their respective group at the expense of the interest of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan.

Exclusion of the people from power sharing has led regional politics towards identity/cultural-based mobilization with a fierce opposition of the state. It is this disjuncture between culture and power that has prompted the masses to assert their distinctiveness demanding the distribution of power over culture. With a purpose of suppressing their assertion the state projects Islam as the base of state ideology and perfect yardstick to gauge the loyalty of any cultural group to the state. In order to avoid the dire consequences of any possible revolt of the masses of Gilgit-Baltistan, the state props up certain sectarian groups as an antidote to nationalist movements or foment sectarian violence through sectarian parties whenever the people unite for a real issue. By doing so, the state in collusion with religion parties and the bureaucratic apparatus has succeeded in dividing the people of the region on sectarian lines and rule over them. The emphasis on sectarian interests destabilizes nationalist sentiments in such a way as to create diversion from the real issues, and create sectarian splits to undermine nationalist alliances.

The plague of sectarianism is eroding the foundations of the society and culture of Gilgit-Baltistan by orienting hearts and minds of masses into activities that are detrimental to the cultural identity of the region. The people of Gilgit-Baltistan are at lost in the confrontation between religion and culture - which expresses itself feebly through nationalist discourses. Due to this, the society is deeply polarized and de-politicized, and has developed an apathy towards the prevalent political, social, economics, and cultural state of affairs. Sadly, the apathetic attitude has trickled down into the idiosyncrasy of the people who left the political arena of Gilgit-Baltistan at the mercy of corrupt and inefficient people and groups. The political vacuum and apathy of masses has provided a chance to the nouveau riche and sectarian groups to bear the torch of leadership. Couple with these, the philistine class, timber and transport mafia, antique smugglers, drug and arms traffickers, political demagogues and religious imposters have become leaders of the aggrieved people of Gilgit-Baltistan.

These new leaders have neither the intellectual depth nor political acumen to fathom the political, economic and cultural exploitation of Gilgit-Baltistan through overt and covert state and religious structures. Instead of bringing an end to exploitation they have created new exploitative structures that can be characterized, to borrow a phrase from Lenin, as 'internal colonialism'. Hence, we see a lukewarm interest shown by an important member of the NALC towards the sacked employees of NATCO to expand his own transport corporation. Besides this we still witness unabated rise in deforestation, widespread corruption and complicity of politician in smuggling on Chinese route, depilated constructions by contractors under the aegis of NAPWD officials, antique smuggling, and silence of politician over the purchase of lands at different tourist resorts by military and civil bureaucrats. An investigation into the nexus between politicians and interest groups will make a revealing research for investigative journalism. A local poet succinctly describes the current political leaders of Gilgit-Baltistan as 'wolves entrusted with a duty to guard lambs'. These leaders thrive on the emotions of people and lack any

viable solution of complex socio-political, economic, and cultural issues of the area as well as the country.

It is an alarming situation for the society of Gilgit-Baltistan. Foremost among different detrimental factors the factor of religious/sectarian politics is noxious for the area as religious leaders are stark opponents of the cultural heritage of Gilgit-Baltistan. They are ready to import and imitate actions and new ideological developments in the fundamentalist discourse in different parts of the world. There is a fear that the day is nigh when the local religious leadership treads on the path of Taliban and invokes a decision for the destruction of the famous statue of *Yachayni* in Kargah, and other rich archeological sites in Gilgit-Baltistan. That will be an example of the heteronomy of religion over culture. Such a situation would be the end of harmonious interaction between the culture, state and religion, and sweeping domination of religion over culture.

Today the society of Gilgit-Baltistan suffers due to the disharmony created by the state and religious groups, and marginalization of the local culture at their hands. It is need of the hour that the state should take drastic measures to curb the subversive activities of sectarian groups, curtail power of civil and military bureaucracy, crack down illegal activities of different groups and mafias, and grant suffrage to masses. On the masses' side there is need to bring culture from inactivity to activity, reject leaders who thrive on illegal activities and businesses, initiate a struggle for suffrage and refuse to follow religious and political demagogues. It will not only facilitate peaceful governance of the area by the people of Gilgit-Baltistan, for the people of Gilgit-Baltistan and to the people of Gilgit-Baltistan, but also provide people with cultural based identity, which is at the brink of extinction owing to the disharmonious interaction between state, religion and culture.

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Note: This research paper was published in Dawn Lifestyle Edition of December 11, 2004 with the title 'Northern Areas Cry for Help'. In order to fulfill the requirements of newspaper its academic parts were removed. For readers I am including academic sections of the paper in this version. This paper was written in March 2001. Therefore, some of the observations might not reflect the dominant discourse regarding role of political Islam in post 9/11 period.