

From Subjugation to Extinction

A Tragic History of The Indigenous People of Gilgit-Baltistan

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ABSTRACT

Gilgit-Baltistan, one of the most mountainous regions on Earth, has been home to ancient peoples with a fascinating and unique culture and traditions. It is in a strategically located territory at the crossroads of some of the world's powerful empires. Far from a blessing, its strategic location has attracted endless suffering for its people. They have become sandwiched between expansionist and hostile colonial powers for centuries. Now Gilgit-Baltistan is left divided between the new colonial masters, India and Pakistan since the partition of the Subcontinent in 1947.

In this article, I discuss the geological history of the land, ancient geographic features of the national territory of the historic Gilgit-Baltistan, and the fatally adverse consequences of colonization on culture, biodiversity, and political life of the people introduced by the British and then carried on by Pakistan. Based on his analysis, the author warns the new geostrategic development may lead to an 'extinction crisis' of the ancient people of the region and leave with irreparable damage to its sensitive ecology.

Keywords: Geology, environment, rock art, human trade, India, Pakistan, China, colonization, human rights

About 50 million years ago, the mysterious land that would become Gilgit-Baltistan was a peaceful home to prehistoric sea creatures in the mighty ancient Tethys Ocean, notable for the Kohistan Island Arc on the southern coast of the Eurasian landmass. Due to the collision of Eurasian and Indian continental tectonic plates, these huge land masses compressed the calm undersea land. The continued compression and folding process uplifted the territory of Gilgit-Baltistan, forming the world's high mountain ranges of the Hindu Kush,

Karakoram, and the Himalayas, Kunlun, Pishkom, Transalay, Tien Shah and Tibetan plateau. "The mountain knot, when seen from an airplane, looks like a sea of mountains, and when seen from the valley, reflects the ferocity and mightiness of the collision of the Indian and Euro-Asian continents millions of years ago." [1] The wilderness and ruggedness of each mountain in the region tell the story of the "shifting, shuddering, hot-hearted planet on which we ride." [2]

Over time, these high mountain ranges began to regulate the hydrological cycle. The continuous flow of freshwater formed rivers, cut beautiful valleys through the mountains and deposited fertile soil, where a variety of life-giving plants grew. We cannot accurately assess when wild animals reached these areas. Still, we know that as a result of Great Migration from Africa, groups of humans reached different parts of the world and began cultivating various civilizations. One migrating group did not stop in Africa, Europe, or Central Asia. Instead, they continued their journey until the first group reached and settled in their chosen land, Gilgit-Baltistan, during the Holocene era from about 12,000 to 11,500 BCE.[3], [4] and initiated establishing their society among these mighty mountains.

With gigantic, snow-covered mountains, beautiful streams, rivers, lakes, and dense forest, this place was an ideal spot for them to grow their civilization. Caves in the vast and rocky mountains provided safe shelter, rivers, and lakes yielded fish, and the dense forests and mountains held ibex and other animals that provided ample food and clothing. Those early people were the ancestors of the descendant people today's Gilgit-Baltistan. This early civilization flourished among the gigantic mountains without any significant external interference for almost 15,000 years. During this long period, they established a sophisticated society civilization intimately dependent on the natural environment. They developed a great respect for nature, beautiful mountains and forest, even worshipping them as sacred. They further developed the skill of hunting, stone carving, building mysterious Megaliths, which they had

learned upon their Great Migration journey from Africa to Gilgit-Baltistan.

Over sixty-thousand rock art (petroglyphs) are spread over Gilgit-Baltistan, demonstrating evidence of the human presence in this area dating back thousands of years. They and their coming generations created these large numbers of petroglyphs on rocks across Gilgit-Baltistan, recording their history from early migration to the present day, such as hunting, dancing, religious rituals, games, and everyday life activities. These people inhabited the land and later period, they established it as a free and independent country. The country's geography comprised of Ladakh in the east, Shankari in the south, Dafdar Khojak and Aryjik in the north, and Chitral in the west.

When they arrived in Gilgit-Baltistan, they brought with them a unique culture, consisting of a set of beliefs, thoughts, and understandings about



Figure 1: The Megalith Builders in Hatoon, Ghazir, Gilgit-Baltistan. Image by the author.



Figure 2: A rock adorned with old and new art in upper Gahkuch, Ghazir. Image by author.

the universe, the Earth, and everything on and in it. External influences did not influence their culture. Since the physical structure of Gilgit-Baltistan provided secure protection from outsiders, their beliefs, thoughts, and understandings remained unchanged for centuries.

Ancient texts of historical significance present details about these people. Famous Greek historian Herodotus (4th century BCE) called them ‘Dard’ (the people of Gilgit-Baltistan) describing them as “warrior-like people on the frontier of India, near where the gold-digging ants are found.”[5] Classical historians such as Strabo (64 BCE to CE 23) and Pliny (CE 23 to CE 79) talk about the same people as ‘Daradae,’ ‘Daradrae,’ or ‘Derdae’ indicating the location of today’s Gilgit-Baltistan. The Puranas, an ancient, vast genre of Indian literature, calls them ‘Daradas’.[6] Book II & IV of the eighteen Mahapuranas, a genre of ancient and medieval texts of India, also records Daradas (Durds of the Hindu

Koh) as among the northern nations like the Sakas, Kambojas, Paradas, Pahlavas, Kiratas, Bahlikas, Chinese and Yavanas.[7] Other important ancient Indian epics, such as the Mahabharata, refer to the Daradas as degraded Kshatriyas[8], and the Ramayana refers to a country belonging to Daradas. [9]

Vārāhamihira, a Hindu polymath, who lived in early 6th-century India, wrote an important work entitled Brhat Samhita, which was an encyclopedia[10] of various subjects.[11] In this book,[12] he mentions the same ‘Daradas’ nation present in the north.[13],[14],[15] Rajatarangini, written by Kalhana in the 12th century CE in Sanskrit, calls Gilgit-Baltistan ‘Daradadesa’ and the people of Gilgit-Baltistan ‘Daradas’ ‘Darada Puri’ and ‘Dard.’[16] Likewise, Chinese, Tibetan, and Hudud al-Alam [10th-century Persian Geography Book] provide an important reference about these people and their geography. They have

themselves recorded their history on rocks all over Gilgit-Baltistan. Many inscriptions on rocks along the Indus and Gilgit Rivers provide the earliest epigraphic references to their Dard kings.[17]

These earliest written records show that these people called themselves ‘Dardic,’ ‘Daradae,’ ‘Daradrae,’ or ‘Derdae,’ and they called their motherland ‘Dardica,’ or ‘Daradrae.’ In later periods, every invader changed the land’s name after invading it. When the Chinese invaded, they named it ‘P’o-lu’ or ‘Poliu’ and “Koei-jen”[18]. The Tibetans named it ‘Bruza’ or Bru-Shal.’ Arabs and other Chinese and Muslim sources used ‘Bolor’ ‘Bolur’ name for it. A British colonial officer (Leitner) coined the name ‘Dardistan.’ Due to the unfinished agenda of dividing the Subcontinent, the land of Gilgit-Baltistan fell into the control of Pakistani and Indian administration. Distorting its identity, India

annexed it with Jammu and Kashmir Pakistani administration changed its name ‘Northern Areas of Pakistan.’ After a long struggle by local people, the ‘Gilgit-Baltistan’ name was restored in 2009 by Pakistan. India recently separated India occupied part of Gilgit-Baltistan from the Jammu and Kashmir state and declared it as Union territory in October 2019.

There are also historical references to another significant segment of the indigenous people of Gilgit-Baltistan called ‘Balti.’ Claudius Ptolemy (100 CE-170 CE), a Greco-Roman[19] astronomer, mathematician, and geographer, referred to the people of Baltistan as ‘Byaltae’ and named their motherland ‘Balti-yul’ (land of Baltis).[20] Balti people are of both Tibetan and Dardic ancestry.[21] Most historians subscribe to the theory that Balti people are Tibetan and Dardic admixture. However,



Photo by Syed Mehdi Bukhari

history reference is silent about when the ‘mixture’ took place. We know that Dardic and Mons people were the first to inhabit the whole region, including Ladakh.[22] They migrated to Ladakh from Gilgit and Baltistan in different periods in many “batches.” “Later [they] settled down along [the] Dras, Skardu, Dah, Hanu, Garkon, Darchik, Skrubuchan, Khalatse, etc.”[23] Evidence of their presence can be seen in the rock art they created across the Gilgit-Baltistan. The stone art peppers the land from Kohistan to Ishkoman and Ladakh originating from the Bronze Age to at least the 4th century BCE.[24]

These ancient mountainous people were unaware that beyond the mountains, their fellow humans in neighbors in China, Central Asia, Afghanistan, Tibet, and India had developed civilizations where humans ruled humans. These neighboring peoples had advanced through warfare and mutual destruction and invented a trading system where wherein which people were sold into slavery and treated as commodities. The rulers of the surrounding kingdoms were hostile and greedy for more land, and greater wealth and resources, along with more people to subjugate. They had created organized religions based on belief systems that declared their rulers to be either gods or the manifestations of God on Earth.

Perhaps, when the people of Gilgit-Baltistan settled in the region, they saw the gigantic mountains as a deterrent to invaders. In the 4th Century BCE, they were not as isolated when the forces of imperialist Achaemenid, during the reign of Darius I (the successor of Cyrus 582-480 BCE) [25], entered their haven. They had crossed the Yasin and Ishkoman passes; they indeed realized

that they were not as isolated and safe as they thought. Instead, they found themselves located on strategically important crossroads. Due to the critical geostrategic location, in later periods, these people suffered from invasion and occupations by Scythians, Parthians, the Kushans, the Sassanian, the Huns, the Tibetans, the Chinese, the Arabs, the Indians, the Kashmiris, the Turks, Central Asian, the Punjabis (Sikhs), the Dogras of Jammu and Kashmir, and the British. These foreign invaders subjugated the people of this unique land, gained control over strategic routes, and exploited the area and its natural resources. Historical evidence suggests that as soon as the central power of these invaders weakened, they then left this land. The people of Gilgit-Baltistan forced some of them to go, and geography with its hard-mountainous life and extremely challenging weather conditions also contributed to their departure. However, the power remained in the hands of invading elements ruled for centuries to come.

Although the people of Gilgit-Baltistan experienced the invasion of Scythians, Parthians, Kushans, Sassanian, and the Huns, the Tibetans and the Chinese conflict in the 8th century left a profound and long-lasting impact on these people. These invasions were in the period around 750 CE when the Chinese and Tibetan Empires were struggling to gain a strategic advantage by controlling Gilgit-Baltistan. The Chinese and Tibetan invasions and hostilities forced the people of Gilgit-Baltistan into extreme poverty. The Chinese killed the top Gilgit-Baltistani leadership accusing them of being allies of Tibet, arrested and took the king and queen as captives to China, and destroyed Gilgit-Baltistan’s system of government

and livelihood. The brutal treatment by the Chinese, particularly the killing of the top leadership, resulted in the most serious damage, from which the people of the area would struggle to recover. After that, the people of Gilgit-Baltistan faced new challenges to their sovereignty from invaders such as Arabs, the Indians, the Kashmiris, Turks, Central Asians, the Punjabis (Sikhs), the Dogras of Jammu and Kashmir, and the British.

Also, a large number of troops from China and Tibet brought mysterious diseases to the people of Gilgit-Baltistan, decimating much of its population. It wasn't until later that the people of Gilgit-Baltistan learned that outsiders could bring diseases with them, and cause epidemics. From this learning, Hunza state imposed a law "any person entering into Hunza state from Gilgit or Kashger had to wash, along with their clothes and other belongings, before they were allowed to enter.[26]

When imperialist Chinese and Arabs declined and lost their control on occupied territories due to their internal conflicts around 750CE. Then, for the next 800 years, we do not find any powerful rising empire around Gilgit-Baltistan that attempted to hold this critical, strategically located area for their interest. However, the people of Gilgit-Baltistan remained under the brutal rule of foreign elements such as Azur Jamsheed (from Central Asia or Iran?) Sang Ali (Central Asia?) and Maqpoon of Skardu (Egyptian or Iraqi?) and their generation for almost 800 years.

These foreign elements, with the titles of Raja, Mirs, and Mehtars, continuously fought each other for dominion over Gilgit-Baltistan and Chitral. The

power struggles killed a large number of Gilgit-Baltistanis. The internal battle for control occurred in other princely states in the same fashion of conspiracy and murdering each other. When Mir, Raja, and Mehter declared war on each other, it was the poor people of Gilgit-Baltistan who did the fighting, killing each other, while their rulers, successful or not, continued to fight to hold on to power or to regain it. This tumultuous period was the darkest age in the history of Gilgit-Baltistan. And this 'dark age' continued for almost 800 years. Though the decline of the flourishing civilization of Gilgit-Baltistan started with the fall of Patola Shahi and occupation by Chinese and the Tibetans, it reached its lowest point during the period of these Rajas, Mirs and Mehters. These foreigner elements could only govern through a system of killing, fighting, and heavy taxation.

The only trade these rulers developed in this period was the 'human trade,' and a significant number of Gilgit-Baltistanis and Chitrali were sold into the slave trade market in Central Asia and Afghanistan. They exchanged humans for hunting dogs or horses. The native population of Gilgit-Baltistan lost a large segment of their people in the slave trade practiced by local rulers. Besides, the rulers imposed more than twelve kinds of taxes, divided the country among their sons, and brutally ruled over the people. The rulers would form alliances for others within Gilgit-Baltistan to invade a targeted Raja, Mir, or Mehter. Finally, their internal power struggles brought the cruel Sikh and In the 18th and 19th centuries, imperial powers around Gilgit-Baltistan rose again. The Chinese utterly consolidated power, annexing East Turkistan, the USSR annexed Central Asia, and

the British colonized the Subcontinent. Gilgit-Baltistan, as a strategic meeting point, attracted the USSR, China, and Britain. The British Viceroy Lord Curzon underlined the vital importance of Gilgit to India: "It is one of the northern gates of India, through which the enemy must advance if he advances at all." [27] However, the British considered the mountains of Gilgit-Baltistan bricks in the wall that served to protect British-India. [28] This "protection" the British understood would lead to using this mountainous area as a base camp for the 'Great Game.' However, the British had realized the difficulties in venturing into the territory because they had information from some historical sources about the problematic area and its determined people. After all, ancient historical narratives, like those of Herodotus (4th Century BCE), Strabo (64 BC to CE 23) and Pliny (CE 23 to CE 79), the Mahabharata (ancient texts of Hinduism) Hudud al-Alam (a 10th-century Persian Geography Book), and the Chinese Buddhist pilgrims Fa-Hsian (CE 401), Sung Yun and Xuan Zang (5th century), had already presented the area as a most inhospitable and difficult "hanging passage." [29] The Sikhs first confirmed this description when they attempted to invade Gilgit-Baltistan and the British agents who visited the area. Therefore, the British planned not to take control of the area themselves, but rather to use the Dogras as an instrument to take control of Gilgit-Baltistan, and they would follow them.

Therefore, the British first supported Dogra of Jammu and Kashmir to invade all princely states and later led Dogra forces to invade all of the states. Finally, they controlled all Gilgit-Baltistan. During their invasion, they committed atrocities against the people of the area. One of the brutal and tragic

events is called MODOORI Holocaust. The holocaust happened when Dogra invaded one of the princely states of Gilgit-Baltistan called Yasin State. British orientalist, Gottlieb Leitner describes the atrocities of Dogra force against the indigenous people of Yasin state as follows:

The slaughter lasted five days and nights. The blood of the victims flowed in streams. And there was not a word of exaggeration in all of this. Thus 2,000 men, women, and children above ten years of age and a countless number of infants and babes became martyrs at the hands of the bloody Sikhs. Three thousand persons (chiefly women) a very few children, and also a few older men were kept as prisoners. They brought in three days to Gilgit, Zoraweru (Dogra troop commander) being elated with excessive joy, which he manifested in various routes. When he came to Gilgit, Isa Rahadur (puppet ruler of Gilgit) and Asmat Shah, selecting 1,000 of the more beautiful women took them to Jammu with 3,000 soldiers. They were so delighted that they had to double march to be early with their good news. In public assembly at Jammu, these scoundrels narrated, with much boasting and eloquence, their achievements. They spoke of the Sikhs and spoke with a loud tone in which victories are reported. [30]

After the massacre, instead of being made to feel shame or being punished for perpetrating crimes against humanity, the Dogra authorizing commanders were rewarded with medals by the Kashmiri Government. Similar atrocities were committed in all the states during the invasions by Dogra and the British.

When the British were leaving the Subcontinent in 1947, instead of letting the people of Gilgit-Baltistan rule on their land, they sponsored internal conflict. Rather than restoring the historical geography (Ladakh in the east, Shankari in the south, Dardar Khojak and Arijik in the north, and Chitral in the west), they promoted conflict by staging rebellion against Dogra. The Dogra became the occupying force. As a result, the first war broke out between the newly independent India and Pakistan. India occupied a large part of Gilgit-Baltistan, and the rest of the territory came under Pakistani administrative control. British did not trust India and considered Pakistan as a future ally against the Soviet Union and the Peoples' Republic of China. The purpose of handing over Gilgit-Baltistan to Pakistan was to keep this geographically strategic territory in the hands of its allies. Britain thought that it might keep its wary eyes on the Soviet Union and China in the north. They sought to use the land whenever they needed it. For this purpose, the British staged rebellions against Dogra of Jammu and Kashmir and caused them to evacuate from all those areas of Gilgit-Baltistan that borders with Afghanistan and China. Such a strategic maneuver would give control over the territory to the Pakistani government.

As soon as these targeted areas were freed from Dogra, the British intervened and stopped the minor war between Pakistan and India for control of Jammu and Kashmir. The British had achieved their objectives and left Jammu and Kashmir issue unsettled. The British did not appear concerned with the right of self-determination of the people of Jammu and Kashmir anymore. The British were right about their predictions for the future of Gilgit-

Baltistan: Britain, USA and capitalist powers later used Pakistani soil as a base camp to launch wars against the Soviet Union and Afghan war.

After arranging the Gilgit-Baltistan rebellion against Dogra and handing over the area to Pakistan, Britain's Major Brown met the first Pakistani Prime Minister, Liaquat Ali Khan. He explained to him why he staged the rebellion against Dogra in Gilgit-Baltistan and why the land was being handed over to Pakistan. In response to his presentation, Liaquat Ali Khan stated, "The Pakistan Government had given the Gilgit Agency a great deal of thought. We have fully appreciated its vital importance to the defense of the Subcontinent and world peace. We have decided that the responsibility has now fallen on us to defend the Agency against aggression." [31] It is this historical context that characterized the newest colonial administration of Pakistan in Gilgit-Baltistan.

With the same understanding, India occupied a large part of Gilgit-Baltistan and committed violent brutalities for more than 70 years and continue. Indian and Pakistani sought to legitimize their control. Both sides created official but biased histories and popularized them to legitimize their control and claim the land for themselves. India wanted to hold the region as a continuation of Kashmiri Dogra's brutal rule, and the British had a plan to deliver Gilgit-Baltistan to Pakistan, as a way of holding onto the strategic location for future use. In this struggle, as with earlier experiences, the battered people and their land were torn into two parts under Pakistani and Indian administration. The world knows a great deal about how India has continued its atrocities in Jammu and Kashmir,

including the Indian side of Gilgit-Baltistan. However, the world knows little about how Pakistan has maintained the British colonial model of ruling in Gilgit-Baltistan; holding the land and denying fundamental human rights to its people for more than seven decades.

To strengthen its control, Pakistan used a 'divide and rule' policy by dividing people into sectarian lines. Whenever the people of Gilgit-Baltistan began to unite in resistance and raised their voice for their fundamental human rights, some invisible hands created sectarian tension in the area. A cursory glance at the history of Pakistani governance in Gilgit-Baltistan gives the impression that the Pakistani government is working towards providing the people their human and political rights and self-rule promised by United Nations Resolutions. However, a more in-depth look into these so-called reform "packages" introduced over 70 years reveals that these changes are merely cosmetic, and serve only to validate Pakistani inaction further. The

purpose of these so-called reform "packages" has been to confuse the people of Gilgit-Baltistan, the international community. The Pakistani government neither gives them equal citizenship rights like other Pakistani citizens, nor the same status as given to Pakistani side Kashmiris. The people of Gilgit-Baltistan have been struggling for more than 70 years to have equal rights as other Pakistani citizens or at least the same status that the Pakistani and Indian sections of Jammu and Kashmiri people enjoy.

The ancient people of Gilgit-Baltistan, a peaceful mountain nation, have long suffered from the actions of invaders and hostile powers. They have not only been denied their self-rule, sovereignty, and dignity, but they also lost a big part of their motherland to aggressive and greedy neighbors. Historically, Ladakh, Kargil, Chitral, Kohistan, and areas along the region's border with China were all part of greater Gilgit-Baltistan. Now Ladkha and Kargil are under Indian Government control,



Figure 3: Gilgit-Baltistan territory - Source: The Author

Chitral and Kohistan annexed by Pakistan, and Taghdumbash Pamir and Raskam territories were lost to China.

It was not only the territory, but the people of Gilgit-Baltistan also lost their identity, culture, and traditions. The process of undermining their traditional heritage fostered Pakistani administration. Pakistan seems to have “placed an unrealistically high premium on its Islamic character. Their goal was a state where Islamic values and identity would overshadow and subsume all differences, including those based on ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity”. [32] Pakistan was created in the name of Islam, other cultural elements used for the establishment of national identities like language, social values, and community identity gave way to the sole factor of religion. Islamic religion served as a national rallying cry. Implementing what amounts to cultural genocide, the rulers of Pakistan committed ethnocide and the deliberate destruction of (local) cultures. They also promoted social hegemony to colonize the peoples of Gilgit-Baltistan holistically. The process of imposing “so-called Islamic culture” was carried out very systematically. In the process, the local culture and traditions not only ignored but also rejected naming them ‘unIslamic.’ Local history was rewritten by paid historians and popularized. Local heroes and legends were described as villains, and the invaders were presented as saviors. This was done to create respect for and obedience to the will of the invaders. It also promoted hatred for one’s past. For example, Gilgit-Baltistan history is taught in grades 1 to 3 in public schools. The social studies textbooks presented a cannibalism story portraying Sri Badad, the last indigenous

ruler, as a cannibal. He was killed in a conspiracy planned by some influential locals and an unknown foreigner (possibly originating from Central Asia or Iran) who has nevertheless been called Azur Jamsheed. The textbooks presented this story as ‘fact.’ To further insult the local ruler and his people, they also popularized the story that Sri Badad’s daughter (NoorBakhat) had secret illicit relations with Azur Jamsheed and gave birth to his son. In reality, Sri Badad was a Buddhist king, and during his rule, Gilgit-Baltistan was still an important center of Bonism, Shamanism, and Buddhism. It is not credible to claim he practiced cannibalism since he was a follower of a peaceful tradition of Buddhism. Nevertheless, this inauthentic story was presented to children as fact and “legitimate official knowledge.”

History textbooks and other locally written history books portray the period before Islam as a period of darkness and ignorance and suggest that when Islam came, everything became enlightened. Most of the books claim that before Islam, the people of Gilgit-Baltistan were ignorant savages and worshiped idols. These books do not acknowledge that when the local people ruled themselves on their land, Gilgit-Baltistan was a prosperous area where people learned to pan for gold and use it as currency. These books do not explain that there were republics in different parts of Gilgit-Baltistan (such as Chilas and Tangeer) where the people voted and selected their leaders, where elected councils made decisions, and where democracy was implemented practically and fairly. Neither is it told in these books that Gilgit-Baltistan had a Buddhist University where people came from all over the world to study Buddhism. The oldest

Buddhist Manuscript, called “Gilgit Manuscript,” was discovered from this region. These books never mention that Gilgit-Baltistan has been an “ancient center of Bön, the traditional religion that predates Tibetan Buddhism, the high valleys of the Gilgit-Baltistan region later served as conduits for the diffusion of Buddhism from India to China and Mongolia from the second century CE” [33]

Nor do these books appreciate the beautiful petroglyphs present in Gilgit-Baltistan, produced by the indigenous since prehistoric times. These books never present that in society, women enjoyed the highest power and even one of the states called ‘Women’s Kingdom.’ The history books remain silent about how the people learned to live in such a challenging environment yet with great sustainability. These books ignore how people showed tolerance towards other religions. We do not find in these books that they ever have appreciated the beautiful, peaceful culture, traditions, and beautiful festivals of these people. Furthermore, these history books omit the fact of the atrocities and crimes committed against the people of Gilgit-Baltistan by the Chinese, Tibetan, Kashmiris, Arabs, British, Dogras, and then Pakistan and India. They remain silent about the MODOORI, Chilas, Skerdu, Hunza, Nager, Gilgit, and Ladakh massacre, where thousands of people were put to a horrible death by the Dogra forces while others were enslaved.

The Pakistani colonial education system continued the elimination of the local traditional culture, traditions, and rituals and even portrayed it as a sacred duty done to assist the spread of so-called Islamic and Pakistani culture in the hegemonic way for social, cultural, ideological, or

economic influence. They adopted many of the same measures the European colonizers used in different parts of the world, such as using missionaries and their sectarian institutions to disconnect the people from their past.

Likewise, Urdu was imposed as the national language, and local languages were not only ignored but also removed the indigenous languages of Gilgit-Baltistan from the national census data collection form in March 2017, relegating them to the ‘other’ category. It was beyond the logic of neglecting the languages of a region that existed a sovereign country for centuries and unfortunately fell to Pakistan and India. Such ignorance is not only against the international treaties and resolutions about the cultures and languages of the indigenous people but also against Pakistan’s Constitution. This method of silencing the people of Gilgit-Baltistan was yet another way of marginalizing them.

The people of Gilgit-Baltistan traditionally followed ecological, cosmological customs and traditions. Living among mountains, they highly appreciated nature. They had beautiful seasonal festivals celebrating the arrival of winter, spring, summer, and fall. There were planting and harvest festivals, festivals for the birth of a child, even celebrations to mark the first hair cut each child received. In short, there were hundreds of types of festivals that the people of Gilgit-Baltistan celebrated together. Since those festivals were not based on religion, everyone was able to participate, and all would come together to make music, dance, and enjoy good food and drink. When sectarian Islam became firmly rooted, and after the beginning of Pakistani control, communal ceremonies and

Pakistani national celebrations replaced these local, traditional festivals. Local traditions were discouraged, naming them ‘unIslamic.’ The imposed sectarian ceremonies and those imposed ceremonies later became the underlying cause of many conflicts, serving to highlight differences between sects further.

As mentioned earlier, for thousands of years, the natural, impenetrable barriers of the great Hindu Kush, Karakorum, and the Himalayas protected the culture and civilization of Gilgit-Baltistan. Although the area was invaded many times, they were able to defend their unique culture survived. The people of Gilgit-Baltistan recorded daily life and important events with the petroglyphs that are present on more than 50,000 rocks all over Gilgit-Baltistan. The earliest of these dates back to between 5,000BCE and 1,000 BCE, showing single animals, people dancing, hunting with dogs, triangular men and hunting scenes in which the animals are larger than the hunters. These carvings were etched into the rock with stone tools and are covered with a thick patina. Many petroglyphs show the records of rulers and the transition of powers, while others depict developments such as the construction of a water dam and irrigation system. Each petroglyph conveys information not only about the culture of the ancient Gilgit-Baltistan people but also of their reactions to various invaders throughout time and the major environmental changes in the area.

Unfortunately, when the Karakoram Highway (KKH) was constructed from the Chinese border through Gilgit-Baltistan to Pakistan, construction blasts destroyed many petroglyphs. According to the famous Pakistani traveler and writer Mustansar

Hussain Tarar, a lot of Buddhist archaeological sites and petroglyphs were destroyed during the construction of the highway, and few of them are remaining. Since there were no systemic surveys conducted before the road was built, only anecdotal accounts from travelers along the Indus River told of these artifacts. It is now feared that even more of the petroglyphs and other cultural artifacts will be lost due to the highway. The Karakoram Highway expansion under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project will accommodate heavy-laden vehicles and extreme weather conditions to open the road to more use all year round. Additionally, the Pakistani government has plans to build a huge dam (the Diamer-Bhasha Dam) in the center of one of the areas most populated with petroglyphs. The land allocated for the dam hosts may destroy some 30,000 ancient art carvings and inscriptions forever.

The Karakoram Highway was first established during the British period when Britain constructed a colonial mule track road to facilitate the British and Dogra invasions and help provide for the garrisons in the Gilgit Agency.[34] Imperial Britain dreamed of establishing a railway in the Karakorum Mountains. The colonial mountaineer, Martin Conway, who had thought of the establishment of an extensive railway network in the Karakoram mountains by the end of the 19th century, stated: “... Gilgit must grow to be an important trade center, and possibly, * * * a railway junction on the line from India to Kashgar, where the Samarkand branch will turn off!”[35] Imperial China had similar ambitious plans. Following China’s imperial dream, China, with the support of Pakistan, built Karakoram Highway (KKH) between 1966 and 1978,

which opened to the public in 1979. It now connects Islamabad, the Capital of Pakistan, and Kashgar in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China. The road passes through the Karakoram and Hindu Kush mountain ranges of Gilgit-Baltistan. China and Pakistan have used the KKH as a strategic extension of a communication network in the context of Jammu and Kashmir conflict. Their aims for doing this included the underpinning of territorial claims through the military presence and the provisioning of the Pakistani garrisons in Gilgit-Baltistan.[36]

China intends that its “economic corridor” project will support trade, and has the potential to create new jobs, as well as improve both the regional and national economies. However, “building new railroads, highways, power lines, gas and oil pipelines across ecologically sensitive areas can cause significant environmental damage, including habitat transformation, fragmentation, and loss, oil spills, local pollution, the proliferation of dust and salt (along highways), and much more.”[37] It seems clear that Gilgit-Baltistan, an environmentally sensitive area, will suffer many negative environmental and social consequences as a consequence of the CPEC project.

As mentioned more previously, the people of Gilgit-Baltistan greatly suffered from the Tibetan and Chinese power struggle, and later the British used the land as basecamp against China and the USSR. Now another ‘great game’ is about to commence. As the CPEC is taking shape and details are coming out, the international players have suddenly started showing their ‘concerns’ related to Gilgit-Baltistan. In October 2017, US Secretary Mattis testified before the Senate and House Armed

Services panels. He stated that the United States opposed the Chinese One Belt Road going through Pakistani controlled Gilgit-Baltistan, a disputed territory. Still, China and Pakistan rejected US criticism.

On the other hand, India is highlighting its sovereignty by continuously emphasizing that the Chinese economic corridor project is not acceptable in the Gilgit Baltistan region. Ironically, India itself is exploiting the people of Gilgit-Baltistan on its side of the border. On the Indian side of Gilgit-Baltistan, people are experiencing the same issues as the Pakistani controlled. On the other hand, Gwadar, with its natural deep port, is considered to be a serious rival to Dubai and other gulf countries. At the same time, Pakistani and Chinese governments completely ignored the people of Gilgit-Baltistan in the CPEC project. No consultation was carried out with them as a decision-making process, nor any tangible share was given to them.

Additionally, the colossal project started without carrying out any social, cultural, and environmental impact of the project on environmentally sensitive Gilgit-Baltistan. People of the region have already lost their patience due to the denial of basic human rights by Pakistan for more than 70 years. Gilgit-Baltistan’s growing resistance as an ideal concern and a desirable environment to create tension and kick off new ‘great game.’ As a result, the ultimate losers will be the people of Gilgit-Baltistan.

Despite a long period of repression, oppression, and subjugation, the ancient people of Gilgit-

Baltistan have managed to survive, even with the loss of much of their population, unique culture, traditions, customs, rituals, and territory. It has been primarily the natural barriers provided by the area's steep geographical terrain and environment that has saved the plants, animals, and the indigenous people of Gilgit-Baltistan from complete extinction. The natural environment is itself facing the most significant threat ever, due to the disastrous exploitation of this susceptible geographic location, combined with the increasing impacts of climate change and global warming. If the expansion of Karakoram Highway is not planned well, it will cause further damage to the environment, biological diversity, and the remarkable cultural and archaeological heritage of the last descendants of the ancient people of Gilgit-Baltistan who will vanish from the face of the Earth forever.

There is a dreadful similarity between the history of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan and the ancient sea creatures that lived 55 million years ago in the volcanic rocks of Gilgit-Baltistan, under the mighty Tethys Ocean on the bank of the Eurasian landmass. Trapped by the Indian and Eurasian continental collisions, those ancient marine organisms became extinct. Similarly, the invasion, tension, and clashes of expansionist and hostile states have trapped and threatened the ancient people of Gilgit-Baltistan with extinction.

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