

**OPINION**

**Growing Plea for Autonomy in Gilgit and Baltistan**

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Which countries of the world can claim having its regions and territories at 7000 metres above sea level? The question is trickier than that it appears to be. The mountain regions of Gilgit, Baltistan, Hunza and Nagar can claim for this honour as the country at the summit of the mountains next to Nepal. However, these regions do not constitute a country or precisely part of any country. It has been termed by UNO and most countries of the world as Disputed Areas under Pakistani control. Pakistan calls it as N.A., Northern Areas. This region of 72000 Sq.Km., little less than double the size of Switzerland, has been a disputed area for the last fifty years. It is part of Jammu and Kashmir and India still claims it as Indian territory.

In Gilgit, the seat of administration is surrounded by mountains. No one would now demand for annexing the region with India. The majority of people belong to Islam and historically they did not have much connection with India. The majority of people belong to Islam and historically they did not have much connection with India. The Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir who joined Indian Union in 1947 had only a nominal power over this inaccessible mountain regions. At the time of Independence of Pakistan, the militant Gilgit Scouts managed to challenge the authority of the King and the claim of India over the territory. The people with whom the author spoke were proud of their liberation by their own power and the later decision of subjecting themselves to the regime of Pakistan. It was the case of that period. Now many of them are bitter about Pakistan's systematic disregard for the region. They feel that Pakistani administration treats them as second class citizens and exploits them.

In contrast to Islamabad's official rhetoric of sympathy for Kashmir, the northern region has always been neglected. In fact the Government of Pakistan wanted the control over the region because of strategic considerations and not due to their care for the local people. The northern areas bridge up the gap between Pakistan and China, the most important ally of Pakistan. The importance has been immense after the construction of a highway of 1300 km. through the N.A., which connects Pakistan and China.

The bitterness is growing among the people because Islamabad has been treating the Northern Areas as a colony for last fifty years. Unlike the Pakistan occupied smaller region of Azad Kashmir, the Northern Areas have no self-governing body or judicial setup. The territory is directly ruled by the government in Islamabad and has been placed under the Kashmir minister of the Cabinet. The present Minister, a former General from Punjab had visited the region three times after assuming charge about a year ago. The Reform proposals prepared in 1994 by the then Provisional Prime Minister, Qureshi, did not please the people. According to Qureshi Plan, the

region can elect a 24-member Parliament and an Administration Body. Islamabad did not want to share power with a Body of Qureshi's concept and placed the areas under direct rule.

Another reason for disappointment is that the Northern Areas have no representative in National Parliament. Observers find that any type of subsidies would be given only when the elected representatives make a plea for the same. The Northern Areas have no such lobby in Islamabad. It has no share to claim in tax-income and should solely depend on the funds from the Centre. Others feel that Pakistan wanted to annex the occupied Kashmir. But, this would be against the declared strategy on Kashmir. Pakistan is anchoring on an UNO resolution of 1948-49, according to which the fate of the State should be decided by a plebiscite. The Government of Pakistan promises everything for the people of Northern Areas after settling the Kashmir problem.

For the last few years, a political awakening has been seen among the people without any contribution to this effect from Islamabad. The opening of Karakoram highway brought in not only tourists and commodities but also new ideas. The elections held to the regional parliament revived several groups under political lines and political discussions have become active. The new awakening was reflected through Hussain Shah, formerly a Major in Pakistan Military. In 1950s, when he was in the Pakistan army, he thought himself as a citizen of Pakistan. Lately he understood how his region was discriminated by the authorities of Pakistan. He came to know about the existence of Frontier Crime Register, which the British Government had instituted through an ordinance, which deprived the people of all rights. Later he quit his job in the army and founded his own political party. The party campaigned for territory called Gilgit-Baltistan, which must at least enjoy some right like Azad Kashmir. Shah said that Indian part of Kashmir enjoys more rights with a special status given by the Constitution and an elected Government. The present status is hermaphrodite which promises only disadvantages. One of the senior officers of the Government said that Pakistan has placed all the duties of the citizens on the people of the region without assuring them the rights. The people of Gilgit and Baltistan must give more blood for the battles in Gilgit, pay all taxes without having the just claim on the income of tourism and the transport of goods through the region. Pakistan would not invest money for the development of the region. The illiteracy (85% men and 97% women are illiterate) and the pathetic conditions of health care arrangements are living proof of the discrimination. Islamabad's earnest claim for Kashmir cannot be made clear to the others as anything more than a legal battle when they evidently disregard the development of the Northern Areas. The regional court of law of Gilgit has three judges. Majority of the three would be from the South. Last year the local Bar Council boycotted the Court at Gilgit because the Presiding Judge from the South refused to vacate his office even after completing his term. In spite of protest of the lawyers, Islamabad did not send a new Judge and there was no functioning of the Court for more than one year.

Even when it was functioning, the local people had no confidence in it because there was no arrangement for an appeal against the decisions of the Court. Even capital punishment cannot be challenged in another court.

However, this situation of "Statelessness" has not caused any massive protest from the people. The Independent Movement has only limited number of followers. The demonstrators did block the Karakoram highway for sometime. But soon afterwards, they were all put in jail. If the economic situation worsens- the unemployment is already very high- the authorities would not be able to

control the protestors. Presently, Pakistan has enough problems of its own and has little time to care about the North.

When one goes Northwards from Gilgit, the valleys become narrower but the quest for freedom becomes stronger. In the erstwhile principality of Hunza, a type of autonomy of farmers' rule exists. The Mast Mir of Hunza was removed by Pakistan in 1974. But, he still enjoys respect of his onetime subjects. The Mir in simple "Salvar kameez" told the author that Pakistan's authority in the region was very limited and the day to day problems have been solved by him with the help and advice of the elderly people. In this paradise at the summit, there is no shortage of money like Gilgit. The head of the Islamic Movement, Aga Khan finances the development projects with the money from his Foundations. Water supply and education have been well looked after.

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