



Gilgit: The forgotten land

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Have you ever tried to publish a map of India omitting the regions North and West of the Line of Control in Kashmir? Just try and see what happens! Without mentioning so-called "Azad Kashmir", the Northern Areas located North of Kargil and Leh districts of Ladakh are rightly considered as an integral part of the Indian territory as this region belonged to the Jammu and Kashmir State when it acceded to India on October 26, 1947.

Forty-seven year later, in 1994, the Lok Sabha reiterated: *"The State of Jammu & Kashmir has been, is and shall be an integral part of India and any attempts to separate it from the rest of the country will be resisted by all necessary means; India has the will and capacity to firmly counter all designs against its unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity."* The Indian Parliament also demanded that Pakistan vacate all occupied parts of the State.

Ten years later, the position of the Government of India is the same. But in stark contrast to this policy, the reality is totally different; the districts of Gilgit and Baltistan (also known as Balawaristan) are totally ignored by the Government of India. This could perhaps have been more acceptable if the population of this area was content under Pakistani rule or if it enjoyed basic democratic rights and amenities. Unfortunately, it is not the case.

During their recent meeting in New York, General Musharraf and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh *"addressed the issue of Jammu and Kashmir and agreed that possible options for a peaceful, negotiated settlement of the issue should be explored in a sincere spirit and purposeful manner."* That is fine;

however, while different confidence building measures (such as the opening of a bus route between Srinagar and Muzaffarabad) are contemplated along the international border and the LOC as a prelude to "core" negotiations, nothing has been said about the Gilgit-Baltistan regions during the "historic talks" in New York; ditto during the Agra summit and the SAARC meeting in January 2004: Both sides remained silent on the issue.

This is the sad comment on the discrepancy between a stated policy and "real politics". The Northern Areas, which are spread over an area of 28,000 square miles, comprise the five districts of Gilgit, Ghizer, Diamer, Skardu and Ghanche.

The people of Balawaristan (approx. 1.5 million) belong to several ethnic groups, including some close to the Ladakhis in Skardu (Baltistan). However, most of these populations are Shia Muslim which explains, in large measure, their gloomy fate.

The imposition of the Sunni faith on the Shia population was the background for the riots engineered in 1988 in the region by Zia-ul-Haq (Mr Musharraf was already involved in the bloody repression). Since then, regular uprisings have been reported: The latest in June 2004, when rioters damaged many public buildings in protest against the imposition of Sunni textbooks.

This is one of the most strategically located regions in Central Asia. Further, these areas have been the base for most of the attacks on Indian territory since 1947.

The latest one in April-May 1999 on the Kargil heights planned by the Pakistani Army used the Gilgit Light Infantry (this created a lot of resentment against Pakistan, as hundreds of local jawans lost their lives in Mr Musharraf's adventure with no gain for the region).

During the 19th century, the Gilgit Agency was part of the territories of the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir but was directly controlled by the British Resident in Kashmir. After Soviet Russia took virtual control over Sinkiang in

1935, British India signed a 60-year lease with the Maharaja giving British India the sole responsibility for the administration and defence of the area. It was only in June 1947 that the lease was cancelled. Though the control over the Gilgit Scouts was then handed over to the Maharaja, a British Major remained the Commandant of the Scouts.

On November 3, 1947, two days after a local revolt against the Maharaja's representative had erupted, the British Major hoisted the Pakistani flag in Gilgit.

At that time, Mountbatten the "Indian" Governor-General, negotiated with his Pakistani counterpart (MA Jinnah) the fate of Kashmir. Nothing was said about the takeover of Gilgit. Two weeks later, a political agent was sent from Pakistan to rule the region which till today is directly under the Federal Government in Islamabad.

The Minister of Kashmir Affairs and Northern Areas administer these areas which are totally neglected; they have no university, professional colleges or industry.

Recently, the Daily Excelsior wrote: *"The northern areas of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir hold the distinction of being the only region whose status is not specified in the constitution. Consequently, the people of this region do not have the citizenship of Pakistan and are far behind the rest of the world in matters of fundamental rights, justice and economic development. The Pakistan Government is of the view that since northern areas are not a part of its territory, it cannot give constitutional rights to its people."*

The Shia population is not only deprived of basic amenities like electricity, drinking water and elementary health care facilities, but is today threatened with becoming a minority in their own district with Islamabad encouraging the migration of Pathans and other Sunnis to the region. While India took the very welcome initiative of inviting Pakistan journalists to visit the Valley and

Jammu, no journalist, whether foreign or Indian, is ever allowed to visit Gilgit or Skardu.

Why such double standards? Why can't a group of Indian journalists visit the area and interact with the people there?

When the Pakistani Ambassador is allowed to give lavish receptions to the Hurriat Conference or other dissident leaders of the Valley, why can't the Indian Ambassador in Pakistan call the leaders of Balawaristan and listen to their grievances? Even scholars are not permitted to visit the region. In an interview a couple of years ago, a Ladakhi Muslim historian told me that he had been invited for a conference in Islamabad where he met some Balti scholars. They requested him to visit Skardu, but the Pakistani Government denied him permission.

One could multiply the examples; two years back, the MORI survey in the Valley and Jammu changed the perception of many of the Western chancelleries in Delhi. Why can't a similar survey be allowed in the Baltistan-Gilgit area? In this context, Nehru made an interesting remark in 1956. The question was about Chitral, a region which had unclear links with the State of Jammu and Kashmir during the 20th century. Nehru wrote: "What in practice we might do later is another matter, and, as a matter of settlement, we may give up what we possess in law. But, there is no reason why we should not mention our legal claim or clarify a legal position."

Nehru added: *"Quite apart from any desire on our part to have Chitral back in the Jammu & Kashmir State, another question may well arise. How is Chitral being used? Is it being developed as a base for attack? According to some information that we have received, the US treat Chitral more or less as a base. Our statement about Chitral is, therefore, some kind of a warning to foreign powers."* The same applies today to the under-developed region of Gilgit-Baltistan, the base for most terrorist actions in the Valley. After all, if these areas are a part of India, its population can't be considered foreigners.