

Gilgit-Baltistan: An Overview

SENGE SERING

Gilgit-Baltistan is a part of the state of Jammu and Kashmir but remains in the illegal occupation of Pakistan. It has an area of 76, 000 square kilometers, almost equal to the area of Assam. Around two million people call it their home. These include Tajiks, Dardic, Burushu and Tibetans. Farming, tourism and gem trading are the main sources of income.

Economic Development

In the context of macro-level development, the Government of Pakistan has adopted a top down approach with government organisations and corporations determining and leading the development projects, leaving little or no role for the local population in the decision making process. The benefits in the larger context often come in the long term but seldom accrue to the people at whose expense sacrifices have been made. For micro-level development, there is a bottom up approach mostly led by NGOs like Aga Khan Foundation. Decision making is at the grassroots level, aimed at capacity building to sustain livelihoods at the local level.

Chinese Interests

China's interests mainly pertain to large scale strategic and economic projects. Locals have no role in planning, policy formulation, execution and benefit distribution. The sectors that the Chinese engage in are building trade and transit routes and tunnels, construction of dams, the energy sector, and mining of

uranium, gold, copper and other metals and minerals. Chinese are now aggressively acquiring mining sites here. Chinese future plans in the region relate to construction of rail tracks, gas and oil pipelines. Transit and trade routes are being planned to enable China to access Pakistani ports and the regions of Africa, Iran and Afghanistan.

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Dams: Why Gilgit-Baltistan?

Gilgit-Baltistan is called the water tank of Pakistan. It has more than 106 mountains over 7,000 meters (21,000 feet) and the longest glaciers outside the Polar Regions are also found here. Three famous mountain ranges, the Himalayas, Karakoram and Hindukush Ranges converge in this region. The Chinese are building three mega dams near this area of convergence.

The Rivers which run through Gilgit-Baltistan have the potential to generate over 30,000 MW of electricity. The largest of these is the Indus which is also a primary source of water for Pakistan. Dams under construction and consideration will however inundate vast sections of the densely populated valleys. Construction of the Daimir-Bhasha Dam on the River Indus commenced on 18 October 2011. On completion, this will be the highest RCC dam in the world and is slated to produce 4,500 MW of electricity, store 8,500,000 acre feet (10.5 km³) of water for Pakistan that would be used for irrigation and drinking and extend the life of Tarbela Dam located downstream by 35 years. The estimated cost of the project is in excess of USD11 billion with an estimated completion time of 12 years. Its location in a highly seismic zone is a source of great concern to the local population who will face all the adverse consequences of construction while the benefits will all flow to the people living in Punjab and Sindh. Skardu town which has a population of over 100,000 people is overlooked by the Satpara Dam. This project, which commenced in April 2003, is slated to produce 17.6 MW of power. This dam is opposed by local journalists and activists due to its faulty design and material use, which could lead to a burst affecting the inhabitants of Skardu Valley.

Local Resistance

Despite local protests, Chinese continue mineral extraction, although they claim to be extracting only sand. Locals fear losing control over their resources and other means of livelihood as they have no role in decision making and the

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lease grant takes place in Islamabad. While Chinese and other foreign companies receive instant access to mineral sites, native mining companies are still awaiting clearances for similar considerations since 2000.

There have been many protests in different valleys of Gilgit-Baltistan in 2011. All political parties united to protest Mohsin Industries in Shigar Valley. Mr. Babajan Hunzai, the Chairperson of Progressive Youth Front (PYF) of Pakistan occupied Gilgit-Baltistan has been active in this respect. The Balawaristan National Front led protests in different valleys of Gilgit-Baltistan, especially Ghizer as well as in Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi. People of Diamer district have been resisting the construction of the Diamer Dam and have been complaining about land compensation, royalty and resettlement policies. Many people have been killed and injured in these protests by the Pakistani security forces. There have also been protests against Chinese miners. People blame the foreign companies for extracting uranium and smuggling with no monetary benefits to natives. Local politicians have also been opposed to foreign companies being awarded mining sites without consent from and benefit to the local population. However, Islamabad continues with its apartheid policy even while all members of Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly passed resolution opposing the discriminatory mining policy of the federal government. Also Gilgit-Baltistan is a Shia majority area with considerable populations of Ismailia, Nurbakhsia and Sunni muslims. Native Shias have been converted into a minority in their homeland and Gilgit-Baltistan is facing ethnic cleansing. The state has been unable to handle the situation and law enforcement personnel are found involved in attack on the Shias.

Local Fears

In addition to loss of control over resources, the local people fear that displacement will lead to the death of their culture, loss of language base and national identity. Displacement will occur due to dam construction and lead to loss of farmland, pastures and irrigation networks due to construction and mining activities. In the long term, displacement will occur due to melting of the glaciers in this fragile ecosystem. Given that most of the natives are poor, illiterate, lacking modern skills and facing language barrier, they will find it hard to compete with others for jobs in their newly adopted settlements. Ethnic and religious conflicts could emerge due to short sighted resettlement policies.

Some of the most archaic forms of modern languages spoken in Gilgit-Baltistan, which have been guarded and preserved by the tall mountains for centuries, are now under immediate threat due to demographic changes and destructive government cultural policies. In the Daimer dam lake itself, over 50,000 specimens of Petroglyphs will be submerged. Petroglyphs are rock engravings, formed by removing part of a rock surface by incising, picking, carving, and abrading. They are found worldwide and are often associated with prehistoric people. Other concerns relate to land and soil erosion due to floods owing to increased ice melting which hurt habitats as well as farmland and water pollution and associated health risks forcing people to migrate. Increase in seismic activity, displacement of wildlife, and forced migration are also matters of great concern.

Migration Issues

New job opportunities associated with dam building, trans-national trade, urbanisation and industrial development has encouraged skilled and resourceful outsider including Chinese and Pakistanis to immigrate to Gilgit-Baltistan. Pakistan abrogated State Subject Rule in 1974 to help enhance systematic but illegal settlements in Gilgit-Baltistan. Recently, Pakistan's Prime Minister signed an ordinance which guarantees double salary to Pakistanis taking jobs in Gilgit-Baltistan; seen by locals as a tactic to change demography. Given that per capita income of Gilgit-Baltistan is one fourth of Pakistan's and thousands of native graduate and master degree holders continue to wait for jobs. The move will only hurt the interests of educated youth of the region. Demographic change occurring has a double impact, involving both displacement of natives out of Gilgit-Baltistan and the arrival of skilled and resourceful Pakistanis to Gilgit-Baltistan.

Conclusion

Gilgit-Baltistan is thus moving towards a model of development which will convert natives into a minority in their own homeland. The Government of Pakistan has treated this area as their colony, denying the local people control over their political, judicial and economic institutions. Unless patterns of governance see a dramatic shift, this region will witness increasing acts of violence in the years to come. India thus needs to keep a close track on the developing situation in Gilgit Baltistan.

Senge Sering is the Director of Washington-based Institute of Gilgit Baltistan Studies