

GILGIT AND BALTISTAN IN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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Gilgit and Baltistan are two sub-regions between the Himalayas on the south and Hindukush-Karakorum ranges on the north. The two sub-regions are separated by Harmaush range but are connected by the upper course of the river Indus that flows through Baltistan and borders the main valley of Gilgit on its south but divides the Chilas district into its northern and southern parts and finally passes across Kohistan district, the so-called *Yagistan* of the British period, now in North-West Frontier Province. Thus the entire region is lying neither to the east of the Indus nor to its west. It is far away from the other tributaries of the Indus, such as Jhelam, Chenab, Ravi, Satluj and Beas. In historical time the region as a whole was referred to as the country of Bolor, particularly in the Arabic, Persian and Chinese accounts. In the Sanskrit sources the general name of *Darad-desh* was used although originally this term was used only for the part in the frontier region of Kashmir around Gurez.

This is an area of high altitude with human habitation, isolated in smaller valleys, each valley being designated by different ethnic names, which the British, for the sake of convenience, grouped them as political districts in opposition to the well-established states of Hunza and Nagar. Similarly Baltistan consisted of the rajas of Skardu, Khaplu, Shigar, Rondu, Kharmang, Tolti and Kargil. Astor was also occupied by a hereditary raja, branching away from the main line of the Skardu rajas.

As the name Bolor suggests, Gilgit has been the most ancient kingdom in the area. The name is most probably derived from the title *Patola*, the Buddhist royal dynasty which was powerful in the region from 5th to 8th centuries AD. After 750 AD the Turks

began to penetrate into this area from the north. In Gilgit they established the *Trakhan* dynasty, in Skardu the *Makpon* dynasty, in Khaplu the *Yabgu* dynasty. Still later we find the branching away of the Ayash rulers in Hunza, the ancient *Wucha*, the rajas of Nagar, and the *Amachas* of Shigar. In about 13th Century AD Chitral State was firmly established and the Kator rulers held firm grip over it. From them branched away the most powerful Khushwaqt rulers of Yasin, who proved to be a great eye-sore to the Dogra ruler Gulab Singh.

It is in the 8th century AD that mediaeval history, for the first time, records a new development in the international game of Asian history. The Arabs were advancing into Central Asia. The T'ang emperors were supreme in China. It is at this time that the Tibetans managed to establish a strong state. As the Arabs penetrated into the Turkish states from the north, the Tibetans advanced into Ladakh, Baltistan and Gilgit as if the two were to join hands. It was against this possible alliance that the T'ang rulers of China sent their Commander Kau-Hsien-Chih of Korean origin to break this mighty alliance. The Commander forced his way through Borogil pass, defeated the Tibetans and made treaty with the rulers of Gilgit and Kashmir. However, in Gilgit the Trakhan rulers got established and in Kashmir the Karkotas became the powerful kings. The contemporary ruler was Latitaditya Muktapida.

These local rulers of the region fought among themselves and sometimes suffered from outside invasions, e.g. of the Mongols from the north, remembered in local tradition as the invasion of *Taj Moghal*. Of far greater consequence was the invasion of the Turkish ruler Abu Sayid from Xin-Kiang into Baltistan, whose Commander Mirza Muhammad Haidar Dughlat played a leading role. Later he shifted his loyalty to the Mughal emperor Akbar. This northern invasion into Baltistan most probably across Karakorum Pass from Yarkand area opened the eyes of the Mughals. As a result the Mughal emperor Akbar first conquered Kashmir and established political relation with the rulers of Skardu. It was only in the time of Shah Jahan that the Skardu rulers accepted subordinate position and in the time of Aurangzeb Ladakh was conquered.

The next development is seen in the nineteenth century when, after the collapse of the Mughal power in India, the British had become supreme and they were extending their diplomatic pre-

ssure into Afghanistan and Central Asia in opposition to the advancing power of Tsarist Russia and dwindling strength of the Central Asian Khanates and also of the Manchu rulers of China. It is in this perspective that we have now to understand the political developments in this area in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The local rulers, who were unaware of the international developments indulged in mutual fights, sometimes seeking help from the neighbouring rulers of Badakhshan and Kashmir. It was this situation which encouraged the Dogra ruler Gulab Singh to send forces to Skardu and the Sikh Maharaja Kharak Singh's governor of Kashmir to send a force to Gilgit to help the local rulers in power struggle. When the Sikhs were defeated by the British in the First Sikh War in 1844, the war in this area was still going on .

There was one big change in the fate of Kashmir. As the Sikhs were not in a position to pay the war indemnity to the British, by a treaty they ceded to the British Kashmir and its hilly dependencies and Hazara area. Maharaja Gulab Singh agreed to pay the sum stipulated for war indemnity and in return to get the ceded territory for himself. But even he could not pay the entire amount and hence Hazara was retained by the British and Gulab Singh could get only Kashmir. What was the position of Gilgit and Baltistan? In Skardu the Dogra force was already present to help the local ruler. In Gilgit he inherited the war situation from the Sikhs. Dogra authority was never accepted there. Later in 1850 when Gohar Aman of Yasin drove away the local ruler along with the Dogra support force, Gulab Singh heaved a sigh of relief and contented himself to remain south of the river Indus as long as he lived. After the suppression of 1857 uprising in India, the British entrenched themselves as a sovereign power in India. By this time their territory had extended right upto Khyber in the west and had become contiguous with Afghanistan. Their province of Panjab at this time included Hazara, Peshawar, Bannu and Dera Ismail Khan districts. Outside these settled districts lay tribal areas in the west and political districts in the north. Afghanistan was still to the west and Gilgit and Chitral to the north, against both of which was felt the diplomatic and military pressure of Tsarist Russia.

It is in this background that we should understand the next move of Maharaja Ranbir Singh, the new ruler of Kashmir, against Gilgit in 1860 when Gohar Aman died. It led to fresh military

conquest of Gilgit and the campaign went right into the heart of Yasin. For the first time Dogra rule was established in Gilgit as a result of their military victory. But the rulers of Hunza and Nagar did not succumb. This was also the case with the semi-organized people of Darel and Tangir, later included in the political districts. The conflict continued until the British discovered secret correspondence between the Mihtar of Chitral and the Russians. The British started sending their missions into this area and even appointed Captain Biddulph as political officer in Gilgit. This was the biggest British diplomatic move in the trans-Himalayan region when the then Viceroy Lord Lytton made the famous Madhopur Agreement in 1876, by which two things were agreed: (i) The Maharaja of Kashmir would be made Maharajadhiraj over all the rulers in the trans-Himalayan region; (ii) in order to achieve this end the military strength of Kashmir, which had already been regulated by the new Imperial Service Troops, was further enhanced by a supply of new military weapons. It was after this agreement that Chitral ruler was firmly tackled so as to stop the Russians from encroaching through that direction.

When later the British discovered that the Russians could reach Gilgit directly through Borogil and Imit Passes via Yasin and Ishkoman, they quickly established their political agency in Gilgit in 1889 and took up the responsibility of military control of the region in their own hands. War was waged against Hunza, Nagar, Chilas, Darel and Tangir in 1891–92 and new administrative and military arrangement was made after their military victory. As promised earlier by the Viceroy, the suzerainty of the Maharaja of Kashmir was declared, but the territory in the Gilgit region was not accepted as belonging to Kashmir. In recognition of the suzerainty the local rajas were made to pay some tributes to the Maharaja and in return the Maharaja gave presents. The nature of the tributes and presents as reciprocal arrangement could be understood by the fact that the Hunza ruler also paid tribute to the Chinese emperor, proving that tribute by itself did not mean subordination. However, by 1895 the British realized that it was impossible to have a control over Chitral from Gilgit because of geographic difficulties. Hence Chitral was transferred to Malakand Agency in 1897 but the Khushwaqtia territory of Koh-i-Ghizr and Yasin was taken away from Chitral ruler but retained with Gilgit Agency. When a protest

was made, the Mihtar of Chitral was given an equal status of twelve-gun salute and a promise that his position of equality with other Indian states would be restored on a suitable occasion. With a view to this end the Mihtar was taken on a tour to different Indian states.

The British soon discovered that they could safely rule in Gilgit only with the cooperation of the local rulers. This led to the creation of Gilgit and Chitral Scouts, in 1913, out of the earlier existing local levies, in which the recruitment policy was made on political basis. The officer cadre of this force was manned by the relatives of local rulers, who were primarily responsible for maintaining peace under British command. Gilgit Scouts was a force of prestige that was created to replace the Kashmir force in this region. The recruitment and promotion in this cadre were made in such a fashion that a balance was maintained between Hunza and Nagar and other political districts on political grounds.

Later when Marxist revolution succeeded in Russia and the USSR forged ahead to reorganize Central Asian Republics, the British woke up to establish their still firmer hand over Gilgit. They forced the 1935 lease agreement on the Maharaja of Kashmir, by which the British still gave lip service to the figurative "suzerainty" title of the Maharaja but snatched away from him the whole of Gilgit Wizarat — all the territory extending north of the river Indus and joined it with Gilgit Agency. Thus a new extended British Political Agency was consolidated directly under the control of the Central Government of India. The lease referred to only the Wizarat, and not the earlier Agency. Such an arrangement became imperative because of the close proximity of the Soviet Republic of Tajikistan, within which Khirgizia then formed an autonomous region.

As far as the defence of the Gilgit region was concerned, the British had demarcated the boundary with Russia and China by establishing Durand Line and by creating Wakhan under Afghanistan as a buffer zone. This acceptance necessarily led to the closing of the traditional Borogil and Imit passes that led to Wakhan on the north and Gilgit on the south. It was convenient for the British to establish new defence post at Kalamdarchi right at Klik and Mintaka passes in Misgar area, where both Russia and China met — a meeting ground of three empires. These passes were

at the extreme eastern end of Wakhan. The Maharaja of Kashmir had nothing to do with this boundary demarcation nor had he any say on opening new passes. The British as sovereign power did what they thought desirable for the defence of their empire. The Kalamdarchi post was manned by a platoon of Gilgit Scouts. Their other men served both on military and police duties in Gilgit Agency.

When the British decided to quit India and hand over sovereignty to the people of the Subcontinent, the question of Gilgit Agency was raised by the Government of India. Lord Mountbatten was authorized by the British Prime Minister to rescind the 1935 lease. Lord Mountbatten decided on his own not only to rescind the lease but hand over the entire agency territory to the Maharaja just to save the British from future responsibility. Jawaharlal Nehru on the other hand maintained that the democratic right of the people in all the states, and not of the Maharajas and Nawabs should be the deciding factor. It was because of this stand of the Congress that Sheikh Abdullah began to play an important political role in Kashmir although his own position in Kashmir State remained to be established by an election. Apart from what happened in Kashmir, the people of Gilgit resented the handing over of Gilgit Agency to the Maharaja on 1st August 1947, fifteen days before the transfer of power to India and Pakistan. When the Maharaja of Kashmir formally acceded to India on 26th October 1947, the people of Gilgit and their military representative, Gilgit Scouts, brought about a revolution, entered into a league with the Muslim element of the Kashmir occupied force, arrested the Maharaja's governor of Gilgit, and established the Provisional Government of Gilgit under the Presidentship of Shah Rais Khan, a descendant of the former Trakhan dynasty of Gilgit, on 1st November 1947. It is this peoples' government which voluntarily opted to join with Pakistan. The Government of Pakistan wavered for a week whether to accept or not to accept this offer probably because of the difficulties of approach for its defence. Later the offer was accepted. The character of the Agency was restored and a Pakistani Political Agent arrived in Gilgit on 15th November 1947.

The Azad Government had appointed its military commander, Captain Hasan Khan, a scion of the notable family of Gilgit, who had played a leading role in Gilgit independence struggle, alongwith

Subedar Major Mohammad Babar Khan, local head of the Gilgit Scouts. Hasan Khan succeeded in wiping out the remaining Dogra force from Gilgit and inspiring independence struggle in other parts of the region. After the arrival of the Pakistani Political Agent there also came a new military Commander in the person of Col. Pasha who had earlier served Kashmir State Force as Major Aslam and had seen service in Gilgit region and thus was well acquainted with local people and local geography. With only local resources available to him he reorganized the Gilgit Scouts, merged them with the defected Muslim element of the Kashmir State force and built a fighting strength to defend the newly established government. One contingent was sent towards Gurez to close the Astor approach road, another was sent to help the people of Baltistan to win their freedom and the third was despatched towards Kargil, Dras and Zoji-la to close the approach road from Kashmir. On 14 August 1948 Skardu fell but before this the Kashmir reinforcement brigade was routed in Khar-mang and Kargil, and Dras and Zoji-la were captured under the command of Lt. Shah Khan. Major Ehsan Ali, after being relieved from Skardu, advanced into Ladakh. One section of Baltistan force pushed into Nobra valley beyond Siachin glacier. All these military successes were achieved by local fighting men who had expressed their popular will to join with Pakistan. Thus the independence struggle of Gilgit and Baltistan was a local affair waged by the local people to express their voluntary desire to join with Pakistan. In view of their wishes the whole region was constituted into one administrative unit, later named as Northern Areas of Pakistan. On 27 July 1949, when Ceasefire Agreement was signed at Karachi by India and Pakistan, the line of control by respective governments was established with the help of U.N. observers in this area as well, apart from the line of control that separated two parts of Kashmir, one under the control of Pakistan and another under India. Sub-para B2(d) of CFL gives the terminus in Baltistan as "Chorbat-la (Pt. 15700), Chulunka (on The Syok River), Khor, thence north to the glaciers." Later the actual point on the north was fixed at NJ 9842, wherefrom the Siachin glacier upto its edge at Karakorum pass was left undefined. Siachin glacier is 72km. long and 2 to 3 km. wide and extends in the south-easterly direction from Soltoro Range which lies on the north of Baltistan. To the north of Karakorum pass flows the Yarkand river

and to its south the Syok River. The southern tip of Siachin glacier gives origin to Nobra river, which joins Syok river further south of the glacier and then the combined water takes a north-westerly turn, giving access from Nobra valley into Khaplu valley in Baltistan. This has been the traditional route passing through Biagdongda (or la), Chulunka, Tartok, Prahnu, Payan, Lanka and finally Khaplu. Biagdongda, 18500 ft., was the easternmost check-post under the control of Pakistan. The normal approach to Siachin glacier by mountaineers has been through Soltoro Kangri via two passes, Sia-la and Bilafond-la. As such right upto 1981 the mountain climbers had been taking permission from Government of Pakistan for their adventurous climb. It is this same practice that motivated the Government of Pakistan to demarcate the boundary line with China at Karakorum Pass — the water-shed between Yarkand valley and Syok valley. This boundary line went to Khunjerab — the water-shed between Tashkurgan valley and Hunza valley. It is from this pass that Karakorum Highway comes down to Gilgit along Hunza river. Khunjerab now replaces the British-period Klik-Mintaka pass. Beyond Khunjerab to the north lies Tagdumbush Pamir which was held by the Mir of Hunza since 1774 and for which tribute was paid to China by him. But the British never considered that territory a part of their domain. Thus in the new boundary demarcation Pakistan has faithfully followed the British line of control.

The aggressive attitude of the Indians was first evidence in the 1965 Indo-Pak War, when a prominent height in Kargil sector was occupied by them and never abandoned. In 1971 War Chorbit-la was captured with a view to pushing the frontier from Kargil into Chorbit sector. From 1978 Indians had been sending expeditions to Siachin glacier from the side of Taran Kangri II, first of which came under the leadership of Col. Narender Kumar of High Altitude Warfare School. A series of Indian expeditions went in 1980 and 1981 right upto Sia Kangri and Soltoro Kangri. It was only on 29 March 1982 that Pakistan lodged a protest against the last expedition/intrusion into Soltoro valley, Goma and Chulunka. By this time Indians had taken possession of Biagdongla, thus connecting their possible line of defence from Kargil to Chorbit-la and thence to Chulunka and finally to Biagdongla. Now the Indians were ready to make their helicopter dash over the main Siachin glacier and aim

at Soltoro range and beyond and, if possible cut off Pakistan's direct link with China.

This aggressive move of India against Siachin glacier is fraught with great danger to the main life line of Pakistan. It is not the glacier itself that is of importance but it is the way to opening future possibilities of close international contact with a super power sitting on the Pamir that should be a concern not only for Pakistan but also for all those great powers which want to avoid collision along this little-known mountain routes.

Both Pakistan and India have a responsibility to resolve their border dispute along the agreed line of control and give to the world climbers peaceful conditions for exploring Siachin glacier. At the same time it is also the responsibility of the respective governments that the people on either side of the line of control should have the right to carry out their wishes for political life as they themselves desire. Any other action will be a mere intrusion proving aggression on the part of the intruders. It is equally valid for the Government of Pakistan to go ahead with the administrative reform in the region under their control and establish a full-fledged governorship with political freedom to the people, which can alone prove to be their guarantee for the defence of their land. After all the people of Gilgit and Baltistan have, of their own accord, opted for Pakistan just to live an honourable life on the basis of their own cultural traditions. This democratic wish, as Jawahar Lal Nehru once maintained, should be fully honoured and transformed into a democratic system of government.