



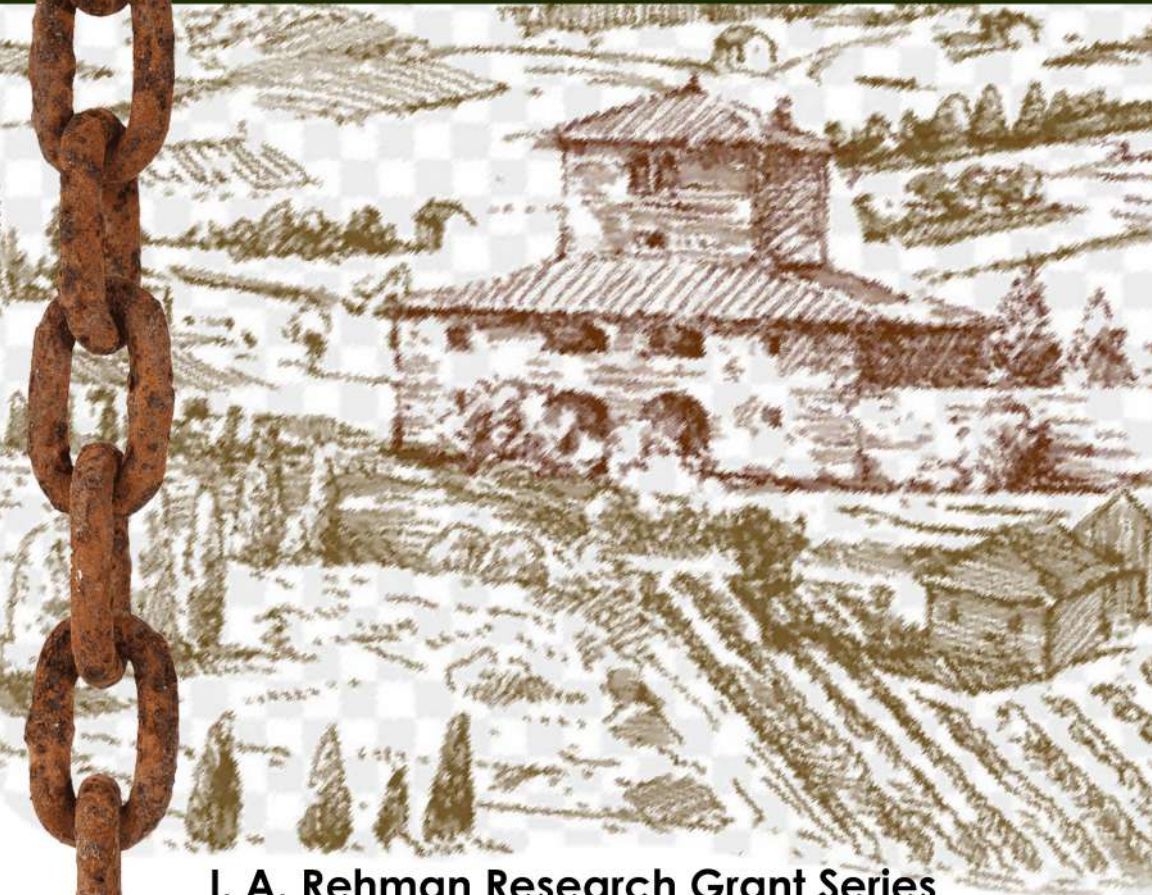
Human Rights Commission of Pakistan



# Internal Colonization in Northern Pakistan

**The Impact on Cultural Rights**

Zubair Torwali



**I. A. Rehman Research Grant Series**

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# Introduction

While northern Pakistan, which comprises upper Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Gilgit-Baltistan, receives significant attention for its natural beauty, its rich indigenous cultures and ethnologies have been sorely neglected, both in terms of state narratives and local scholarship. The region is treated as a political periphery, subject to the whims of a majoritarian Pakistan, which, as this essay argues, has led to a form of internal colonialization and concomitant crises of social, political and cultural identity with a particular impact on the region's indigenous languages.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan believes that the right to a distinct cultural identity is closely linked to the notion of human dignity. As such, collective cultural rights are protected by Article 28 of the Constitution as a fundamental right. Forced or involuntary assimilation is therefore cause for concern from a human rights perspective, as this essay will show, including if this is promoted on the grounds of a perceived 'desirable' cultural uniformity.

This study attempts to analyse northern Pakistan's situation after independence in 1947. It examines the extent to which ethnic communities in the region are still subject to internal colonization even after the creation of Pakistan, and to what extent this has affected people's linguistic and cultural identities and their political rights as enshrined in the Constitution.

The methodology used combines an analysis of the literature with interviews with residents of the region and the author's own lived experience in this context as a political and cultural rights activist.

# Internal colonialism

Colonialism is controlling power over other people's material and immaterial resources. As a process of domination that justifies the subjugation of one person to another, it is embedded in the power relation that produces a discourse favouring the colonialist. It occurs when one powerful group or nation subjugates the indigenous people, drives them from their land and imposes its language, civilization, culture and values upon it. Settler colonization means that a group or a nation is forced out of its native land by another powerful group or nation and occupies it. For this, the native people are killed, or such situations are created where they are forced to leave their land and go elsewhere as refugees or immigrants. Then, they gradually abandon their languages and cultures and adapt to the dominant languages or cultures. In parts of the world, colonialism is very visible, while in many others, it is underway silently in various forms.

The modern form of settler colonization is buying or snatching land from the natives at low prices or through various laws and making them subservient to colonial rule. Another rampant form is instituting such policies, which ultimately deprive the indigenous population of their rights to culture, languages, and land. The acculturation of the minority and ethnic groups by the so-called nation states is an invisible form of internal colonization, which, in its essence, possesses the sense of ethnocentrism of powerful majority groups in a nation state. They impose their power in the name of civic nationalism and 'national unity' by resorting to hegemonic and homogeneous practices. Internal colonialism is what Robert Bob Blauner describes as an uneven development between the different regions within a state, which is the result of exploitation of the minority groups that leads to political and economic inequalities (Howe, 2002).

In their scathing critique of the development model against the backdrop of the UN's Earth Summit in 1992, a group of environmentalists aptly described the process of internal colonization:

Using the slogans of 'nation-building' and 'development' to justify their actions, Third World

governments have employed the full panoply of powers established under colonial rule to further dismantle the commons. Millions have lost their homelands—or the lands they had made their home—to make way for dams, industrial plants, mines, military security zones, waste dumps, plantations, tourist resorts, motorways, urban redevelopment and other schemes designed to transform the South into an appendage of the North ('Whose Common Future?', 1993).

When domination and colonization continue for a long time, they gradually enter the collective psyche of the native populations and are transmitted to generations. As a result, they consider the settlers to be messiahs and like to paint themselves in their colours. This psychological process is the result of what Fanon (1986) says of the colonized: 'I am overdetermined from without.' Freire (2005) maintains that, as a result, 'the oppressed cannot perceive clearly the "order" which serves the interests of the oppressors whose image they have internalized.' The colonized revere the colonizers' language and culture more than their own. They cannot resist what the colonizers impose on them. They feel proud in the master-slave relationship and exalted when portrayed as loyal subjects.

### ***How internal colonialism expresses itself in northern Pakistan***

Whether the ethnic nations of Northern Pakistan who speak languages like Shina, Burushaski, Balti, Wakhi, Indus Kohistani, Khowar, Kalasha, Dameli, Gawarbati, Palula, Torwali, Gawri, etc. are victims of domination and colonization is a question this study tries to explore. It is commonly held that colonialism is associated with the European colonization of the indigenous people that started in the fifteenth century. This author, however, does not limit it to the European invasions of the world, as colonization had also been practised by the city-states of Greece and Phoenicia and by major empires of the world in the Middle Ages.

The research on the indigenous languages, culture, and sociopolitical conditions of communities dwelling in Northern Pakistan indicates that they were subdued long before the

British Raj. Being at the crossroads of Central and South Asia where many invaders found their way via the Hindu Kush, these communities from Dardistan—the geo-cultural region from Laghman in Afghanistan to Kashmir, including the mountainous areas of the Hindu Kush, Karakoram and Western Himalaya—have been overpowered by various empires. One invading empire was followed by another till these communities were divided across the borders with the making of nation states of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asian republics, separating and alienating them from each other. The cruel subjugation of these communities started in the early eleventh century when Mahmud of Ghazni attacked Gandhara and ‘Kafiristan’ (now Nuristan) in Afghanistan. With accelerated speed in the sixteenth century, the Western invaders colonized these communities, and many were delocalized, resulting in a loss of languages, culture, shared identities and history. These communities are now victims of a form of internal colonization, which is subtle and more pernicious than settler colonialism.

### ***Self-hatred***

Self-hatred among the colonized is a direct impact of colonization. On an individual and communal level, hate is directed at their people and upon themselves. In the words of indigenous scholar and poet Lee Maracle, ‘Blinded by niceties and polite liberality, we can’t see our enemy, so we’ll just have to kill each other’ (cited in Armstrong & Grauer, 2001). One of the effective strategies of the colonialists is to dismantle the indigenous power structures rooted in the indigenous cultures and wisdom.

Applying the most common strategy of ‘divide and rule’ and robbing the local populations of the past and indigenous values, the colonialists thus inflict the indigenous population with psychological ailments wherein the colonized suffer from what is called a colonial mentality. This results in the denigration of the self, culture and community, as well as discrimination against the in-groups. The ethnic identity gets badly damaged, and the colonized lose the anchorage and search for new identities and social groups to hold their fragmented self. This makes them prone to new forms of power structure, narratives and dynamics. After internalizing the oppression, they conflict with their people on the grounds of newly imposed ideologies and narratives.

The most apparent examples of self-hatred are inter- and intra-communal conflicts and the division of the people into various sub-groups because of the new forms of imposed knowledge and narratives. As a result, these ethnic groups cannot resist the oppression collectively. In Northern Pakistan, a clan fights with another clan, a tribe takes arms against another tribe, and a village becomes the enemy of the next village. In many cases, conflicts over pieces of land, family honour, and religious denomination are the basis for such internal strife. People of the region have indulged in fighting for decades over these issues, whether it is between Hunza and Nagar, Hunza and Gilgit, Gilgit and Chitral, Diamer and Gilgit, Pattan and Kandhia, Utror and Kalam, and Thull and Kalkot.

Sectarianism is one of the most fatal diseases among the colonized people. They are shorn of their traditions, belief systems and cultural practices. Lacunae are thus created within the social and cultural fabrics and then filled with new narratives and values, creating tensions that eventually lead to violence and wars. Hatred based on religious belief is a visible phenomenon among the communities of Northern Pakistan. Analysing the sectarian unrest in Gilgit-Baltistan, Aziz Ali Dad, a social scientist and activist from Gilgit, states:

A state-sponsored Islam has been changing the local version of the faith system and its dynamics. Through this narrative, the state erases the cultural and historical memory of the region, which has the potential to create a unique identity for the region. Power functions in a very diffused form in the region, and this power is from the centre; manifestation of this power is visible everywhere in the area. Here, people who, negating the local narrative, support internal colonization are promoted in every institution. Thus, local voices are subdued, and local wisdom is subsumed for the nation-building project.<sup>1</sup>

Gilgit-Baltistan has several Islamic denominations, such as Shia, Sunni, Ismaili, and Nurbakhshi. Shias comprise the majority of

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1 Personal communication with the author.

the region. Locals assert that relations between Shia and Sunni communities of Gilgit-Baltistan were amicable in the past. Things, however, changed over time when a fundamentalist version of Islam supported by the centre was imposed in the region, which culminated in the Sunni-Shia clashes in 1988. Giving an outline of the history of sectarian tension in Gilgit-Baltistan, Sökefeld (2014) narrates that in 1988, in the last days of General Zia-ul-Haq's regime, a large number of extremist Sunni men from Diamer and the adjacent Kohistan attacked the Shia villages in and around Gilgit. The law enforcement agencies, including the army, remained silent spectators in the weeks-long battle, which caused many deaths. An official estimation of casualties is about 100, but the actual number was never made public.

Incidents of sectarian violence also happened in the 1970s and 1980s, and since then, every year, we see such fighting in Gilgit and Diamer. When the Senate of Pakistan passed the Criminal Law (Amendment) Bill 2023 related to blasphemy, sporadic incidents of sectarian tension and protests once again broke out in Gilgit-Baltistan over certain controversial remarks by a cleric, bringing the region to a standstill. This incident was not covered by the mainstream media in Pakistan ('GB Unrest', 2024). Many people in Gilgit assert that the federal government is to be blamed for sectarian tensions in Gilgit-Baltistan as it sent many radical Sunni ulema to the region who made controversial speeches. Of course, the Sunnis repudiate this accusation and hold the Shia ulema responsible for sectarianism (Sökefeld, 2014).

Most of the Shia population in Gilgit and Astor speak the same Shina language as spoken by the people in the Diamer region. Yet, the linguistic affinity cannot reign in the Sunni-Shia conflict between these people. The reason might be that mainstream Pakistan promotes a single religious identity based on the majority religious denomination, erasing plurality for the sake of creating a homogenous identity based on religion. Aziz Ali Dad summarizes, 'There used to be no internal colonization among or by the various cultural and linguistic groups in Gilgit-Baltistan but recently we see an elite capture which, under the state structure of Pakistan using the state institutions to capture land and other resources.'<sup>2</sup>

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2 Personal communication with the author.

# Delocalization and acculturation

Delocalization and acculturation are among the most visible impacts of the colonization of indigenous people. Colonization results in dissociation of the local populations from their ancestral lands. This reinforces acculturation and loss of identity. When colonization of these indigenous communities began in the eleventh and then in the sixteenth centuries, these communities were killed, scattered and delocalized. The invaders distributed their lands among themselves and made the ones who embraced the colonizers' worldviews their tenants, imposing their languages and cultures upon them. The ones killed remained obscure in history, while the ones who fled lost their links with their native communities and adapted to new forms of social realities defined and drawn by the colonizers.

## ***Erasing linguistic and cultural diversity***

Frantz Fanon writes in the context of the black and French identity and points out that the colonized becomes a divided self. Today, we have an abundance of similarly divided selves among the communities in Northern Pakistan who identify themselves with the colonizers, whether Arab, Iranian or Pashtun. This causes the loss of identity and its expressions in the form of culture and languages.

Many of the indigenous names of the places have been replaced with names in a dominant language, whether Urdu or Pashto. Before Pashto could become a dominant language in areas like Swat, Kohistan and Dir, Persian, an official language of Mughal India, did the same with the local toponyms and ethnonyms.

In the Torwali area in Swat, the Torwali names of almost all villages were officially Pashto-ized or Arabized during the era of the Swat State, from 1917 to 1969. The original name of the main town of Torwali, Bahrain, was Bhaunal. First, it was changed to Braniyal, and then it became Bahrain. Balakot was initially known as Chatgaam. Similarly, the names of villages Kamal, Gurnal, Manikhal, Zjohgor, Zjemet, Derel and Puraan Gaam were replaced with names like Kedam, Gurnai, Mankiyal, Laikot, Ramet, Darolai and Zore Kaley respectively. The same thing happened in Chitral

and Gilgit-Baltistan. The name Gilit has been changed to Gilgit. We now see the names of many villages in Hunza, Gilgit, Baltistan, and Chitral with the prefix *abad* (settlement). The names Kohistan and Kohistani are similarly imposed upon them. The communities like Shina, Gawri, Mayo and Torwali living in areas around the Indus River in the Hazara division or on the banks of the Swat River in upper Swat and by the Panjkora River in upper Dir were described by these colonizers as Kohistanis and their languages as Kohistani ignoring the fact that almost all these languages are not mutually intelligible.

Many indigenous names of people like Yooney (moon), Cherit (sparrow), and Gholaei (dove) were translated into other languages as Spogmai, Chirya, and Kabutar (or Kontra) when these people applied for the national identity cards. It was because the officials in the registration office did not know local languages.

Until the seventeenth century, some indigenous groups were isolated enough to retain their culture and belief system, but today, only the Kalash people have remained unimpaired. The Kalash are generally referred to as *kafir* (infidels), and their land as 'Kafiristan' (the land of the infidels). These normative terms help legitimize the proselytizing of these people who are already under constant pressure from the neighbouring Muslim population.

The Swat valley wedged between the Hindu Kush mountains follows the route forged by the swift waters of the Swat River. Ironically, Swat provided an ideal place for the invading forces to kill the indigenous peoples for their lands or to drive them further into the valley's interior or beyond. After the Pashtun takeover, the lands of Swat were divided into Pashtun chiefdoms until 1849, when a religious leader, Abdul Ghaffur, known as the Akhund of Swat, formed a princely state (Islam, 2014).

Nearly seventy years later, in 1917, this princely state took on a bureaucratized structure under the authority of Abdul Ghaffur's grandson, Miangul Abdul Wadud. From 1926 until 1947, Swat existed as a princely state in British India. In August of 1947, the British Empire withdrew virtually overnight, and a few months later, Swat State acceded to the newly created country Pakistan. It remained an autonomous region till its annexation and merger with West Pakistan in 1969.

For indigenous peoples worldwide, a significant result of territorial colonization is the destruction of their traditional land boundaries and the subsequent displacement of entire communities. The valleys and villages constituting the Maydan, Bahrain, and Kalam stretches in Swat were once part of the Torwali region (Stein, 1929). After the state of Swat pushed further into the region in 1921 and 1922 (Barth, 1956), Torwali was reduced to a small area encompassing the town of Bahrain and adjacent areas where approximately 140,000 indigenous people speak the Torwali language today.

### ***Racism and linguicism as results of colonialism***

Institutional discrimination towards lesser-known languages is practised both at institutional and societal levels. Schools, classrooms, and textbooks are sites that silence indigenous languages and cultures and violate the very fundamental rights given by the constitution of Pakistan.

In Swat, many Torwali, Gawri and Gujar students complain of racial bias and discrimination at the colleges and universities.<sup>3</sup> They are discriminated against for being ethnically different and speaking languages which are regarded 'inferior' by the speakers of the dominant communities. The same applies to students from the Indus Kohistan region who study at colleges and universities in Abbottabad or Mansehra. The Gawri people of the Kalkot tehsil (Kumrat valley) in upper Dir and the Gawarbat, Dameli and Palula-speaking population in southern Chitral also experience this kind of racism and linguicism by the neighbouring dominant community who speaks Pashto.

The term 'linguicism' was coined in the 1980s by Finnish linguist and educator Tove Skutnabb-Kangas to describe the 'ideologies and structures that are used to legitimate, effectuate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources between groups, which are defined on the basis of language' (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1986). Linguicism, according to Gynther (2007), 'is a matter of depriving people of power and influence due to their language.' According to theorists and practitioners, linguicism can be implicit and explicit. The non-use of languages

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3 Personal communication with members of the Torwali Students Society, University of Swat; and Gawri and Gujar students.

as a medium of instruction exemplifies the former, whereas the latter can be illustrated by prohibiting certain languages in classrooms. Linguicism operates by stigmatising languages or dialects. It is discrimination created by the hegemony of certain social groups over others.

Hegemony denotes the ability of a group of people to control all social institutions and, consequently, influence the norms, values, ideas, expectations, and behaviour of the hegemonized. Hegemony does not involve force alone. It goes beyond that and incorporates ideologies and influences perceptions. Thus, people are made to believe that their values, norms, language, and culture are subordinate to those that are dominant.

In the Pakistani context, we can see linguicism operating in spirit. Whether covert, overt or systematic, linguicism is a product of the dynamics of the distribution of power within our political milieu, which is a product of the colonial era. Using the colonial term 'vernacular literature' to denote the literature produced in local languages suggests a form of covert linguicism. Our political rhetoric and social discourse quite often abhor colonialism. However, we forget that its legacy is still quite prevalent in our attitudes and policies in the form of ideologies and structures.

The official policy in Pakistan did not allow the state to recognize local languages. Pakistani languages were stigmatized as 'provincial' and 'regional' or treated as dialects. In Pakistan, the prejudice against languages other than Urdu and English exists even today. Almost all the major educational reforms and policies between 1947 and 2017 have maintained linguistic discrimination and imposed a form of linguistic imperialism by denying a majority of children the right to education in their languages. Another example of linguicism in Pakistan is not counting many languages in the population census. The overt linguicism by the state has generated negative attitudes or covert linguicism in our society.

The federal government thwarts any attempt to take measures for the languages in Gilgit-Baltistan. The same is true for Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where a few ill-conceived measures have been taken. The Awami National Party-led government passed the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Promotion of Regional Languages Authority

Act in 2012. More than 12 years have passed, and this is still awaiting implementation. The provincial government had included five languages—Pashto, Hindko, Saraiki, Khowar and Kohistani—to be gradually taught at the public primary schools in areas where most children speak these languages as their mother tongues. Under this policy, the five languages would be taught as subjects, and textbooks were developed up to grade four. Until 2023, no teachers were appointed to teach these languages. Another issue is defining the 'Kohistani' language. The people who speak Shina and Mayo in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have claims over the term 'Kohistani' to their respective distinct languages. This confusion has delayed the teaching of Kohistani as termed by the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government.

# Fragmented social and political structures

In his study on the Shia-Sunni violence in Chilas, Chaudhary (2014) has concluded that the blood feuds came with the acephalous system introduced by the Pashtuns. Similarly, Keiser (1991), who studied the Gawri-speaking people of Thull in the upper Dir district, stated:

The cultural values, concepts, and ideas so important to organized vengeance in contemporary Thull were probably introduced at the same time Pathan missionaries converted the Kohistanis to Islam. Their effect on existing social organization and culture set in motion processes of change that ultimately resulted in a new, unique Kohistani sociocultural system—a system, however, neither logically consistent nor tightly structured.

After colonization, these communities lived in what Barth (1956) called 'acephalous political organizations' in Swat and Indus Kohistan, whereas 'related peoples in Chitral-Yassin-Gilgit are organized in small, centralized states.' Before the expansion of modern states to these areas, the people of northern Pakistan had this traditional political organization. Villages and valleys were autonomous, and political allegiance was primarily based on lineage and descent. In some areas, there were centralized minor states like the ones in Gilgit and Hunza since 700 CE.

In the wake of the Great Game, the struggle for control over Central Asia between Russia and Britain, the British applied a policy of controlling the northern borderline states of Gilgit and Chitral. They consolidated their power through the local rulers in these areas, who were responsible for maintaining the political order with the support of village and valley-level local influentials. The British, however, did not apply this policy to Kohistan, Diامر, Swat and Dir. The British Political Agent indirectly controlled the local princely states established in Swat and Dir.

These states were encouraged to expand their rule in areas where the Dardic people, like the Torwalis, Gawris, and Indus Kohistanis, lived. The Swat State annexed the Torwal area in 1921–22, leaving the Kalam territory under the direct rule of the British Political Agent. The Panjkora valley in upper Dir came under the authority of the Nawab of Dir, while the western part of Indus Kohistan up to Kandhia was annexed to the Swat State by 1939 (Khan, 1963). These areas were mostly acephalous after the Pashtun takeover.

The Shinkari and Indus Kohistani areas had independent political units, labelled 'segmentary republics' by the German anthropologist Karl Jettmar. According to Frembgen (1999), the main political units were Duber, Jijal, Patan, Seo and Kandhia on the right bank of the Indus River. In contrast, on the left bank of the Indus River, in the Shinkari Kohistan, these units were Basha, Harban, Shatial, Sazin, Sumer, Jalkot, Palas, Kolai and Batera. Each valley had a fortified village with houses with huge watchtowers known as Shikari, which were like forts for men to defend their 'republics' against invasion.

There used to be constant armed conflicts between these villages or valley-based republics, mainly over grazing lands. For that reason, the areas were mostly known as Yaghistan (the land of lawlessness). Frembgen (1999) states that the case of the valleys of Tangir and Darel in Diامر was different, and these acted as a transitional zone between the northern centralized states and the southern segmentary republics. With the British takeover of these areas, the fortification of villages was abandoned, and various clans moved out of these villages to settle elsewhere. On the issue of organized vengeance and blood feuds, Keiser (1991) states:

In all probability, organized vengeance did form a part of the social order in pre-Islamic Kohistan—though not related to honour based on sexual purity of women and limited to intercommunity relations. Intracommunity peace was critical for survival in an environment where force often decided political differences between settlements. Networks of alliance and hostility among communities cast in terms of organized vengeance provided a degree of order in an otherwise anarchical situation.

In his ethnographic study carried out in 1954, Barth (1956) wrote about the practice of sex segregation and seclusion among the Gawris. He wrote that in marriage ceremonies, 'No strict separation of men and women is observed; the women do not wear veils, and there are no restrictions on the two sexes being together.' However, he noted that 'Adultery is a public offence, for which the punishment is permanent exile. The aggrieved husband is, however, expected to try to kill the offender, and there can be no case raised against him if he is successful in this' (Barth, 1956).

Based on 'what is known of contemporary pagan tribes in the area', Keiser (1991) states that during the pre-Islamic period, 'Women did not seclude themselves; relationships between men and women were relatively free and open; and the sexual purity of women did not predicate notions of honour.' He, however, also notes that 'It appears likely that immediately after conversion to Islam the core of Kohistani social organization and culture remained generally unchanged.' Keiser, who did fieldwork in 1984, was told by his informants that 'the rules of strict purdah now in force are recent, occurring only in the last few decades.'

Now, there is a strict imposition of the veil for women among the Gawri people of Thull and Kalam, and the notion of *ghairat* (honour) related to women can lead to death and hostility among the people for decades. In Indus Kohistan and Thull, the situation is even graver. Any man who is accused of having an extramarital relationship is dubbed a *chor* by the community members and is eventually killed by the relatives of the girl. In the case of court marriages, the couple is eventually killed.

The little information available about the political organization of pre-Islamic communities in northern Pakistan suggests differences between the indigenous councils and the prevalent form of *jirga*. A report published by the National Commission on the Status of Women provides a comprehensive description of *jirga*:

The *jirga* refers to tribal councils, local institutions of conflict settlement that incorporate prevalent local customary law and rituals. The *jirga* is an all-male institution where designated 'honourable men'—mostly family headmen, village elders, tribal

chieftains and landholders—arbitrate conflicts and give solutions that focus on restoring societal equilibrium rather than justice and human rights of individuals. The collective decision is socially binding on the parties involved. ... As the apex body on conflict mediation at the community level, the jirga is composed of tribal or clan chiefs as well as elite men of the community who are deputed as judges; the elders are not elected, nor do they have any legal or adjudicatory training, but consist of landholding members of the tribe who exercise considerable political power (Brohi, 2017).

The traditional assembly or council, influenced mainly by the Pashtun jirga system, were known by different names in different areas. For instance, in Harban, these councils were known as *sigas*, whereas in Torwal and Panjkora, they were known as *yarak* and *kher*, respectively. These terms are almost obsolete, and the word 'jirga' is commonly used. The jirga members are now mostly known as Malikis in Swat, Dir and Kohistan, while in Shinkari Kohistan and Chitral, the men associated with Sigas and Mahraka are known as Jashtero.

Among the Torwalis, Gawris and Mayo people of Swat and Kohistan, as Barth (1956) states, the political organization was based on descent, common ownership of a territory (village or valley) and a working political alliance. This alliance was usually called *lat* in Torwali (substituted with the Pashto word *dala*). In Torwal, each village had its council, but a central Yarak was convened in times of issues about the entire country of Torwali. According to Barth, the central council was convened in the old Braniyal village.

Like the institution of jirga, many values around honour and organized vengeance among the non-Pashtun communities in Northern Pakistan seem to have come with the dominant culture. In the last 50 years or so, religious fundamentalism has gained strength as men, with increased exposure to cities, bring back a puritanical view of religion. Mixed with the local hybrid culture, it gave rise to murder and killing based on the values of *ghairat* and *badal* (revenge).

# Political colonialism in Gilgit-Baltistan

The political history of Gilgit-Baltistan is peculiar. Raja Gulab Singh of Jammu bought Kashmir from the British through a deal known as the Treaty of Amritsar in 1846 for 7.5 million rupees. As a result, Gulab Singh became the first Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir. His successor, Ranbir Singh, not only managed to establish firm control over Gilgit city in 1860 but also forced the independent kingdoms of Hunza and Nagar to accept Kashmiri suzerainty.

All of this happened when the British interests in the area were heightened because of Gilgit-Baltistan's strategic location in the backdrop of the Great Game. Between 1877 and 1881, the geopolitical affairs of Gilgit were looked after by Major Biddulph. The Gilgit Agency was reopened in 1889 by Col. Durand, who shared administrative powers with the Kashmiri Governor in Gilgit. The British influence and control in the area increased after they attacked and merged Hunza and Nagar with Gilgit Agency in 1891. Since there were conflicts in the joint British-Kashmiri rule, the British obtained the Agency on a 60-year lease from the Maharaja of Kashmir in 1935. However, the British returned the area to the Maharaja two weeks before independence in 1947. In November, the Gilgit Scout arrested the Kashmiri Governor and declared Gilgit's independence with a request for accession to Pakistan. Soon afterwards, the Government of Pakistan appointed a political agent to manage the region.

Citing Gilgit-Baltistan's status as a disputed territory under international law, Pakistan has never accepted the request for accession (Sökefeld, 2014). Since then, Gilgit-Baltistan has existed as a de facto province of Pakistan, but its people do not enjoy full constitutional rights. In a series of articles, Ashfaq Ahmad, a local scholar and lawyer, has commented on the continuity of the colonial system in Gilgit-Baltistan:

What has been done with Gilgit-Baltistan through tools like the various executive orders, whether of 2009, 2018 or 2019, is a replica of

the Minto-Morley Reforms passed to rule India in 1909. None of these orders can be challenged by either the Chief Court or the Supreme Appellate Court in Gilgit-Baltistan. Even a cursory comparison of the laws by the Pakistani state for Gilgit-Baltistan and of those imposed by the British to rule India show that the present political and administrative system in Gilgit-Baltistan is a continuity of the British colonial rule in the subcontinent (Ahmad, 2019).

Israr Uddin Israr, a human rights worker and activist from Gilgit, has the same view. The following excerpts are from an interview in which he has given valuable insights about the political situation in Gilgit-Baltistan.

As Gilgit-Baltistan is not recognized as a province, it does not enjoy equal constitutional rights. Article 258 of the constitution of Pakistan empowers the president to draft executive orders for 'any part of Pakistan not forming part of a province.' Gilgit-Baltistan has been run through these orders since 2009. The fact that these orders cannot be amended by the Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly or Gilgit-Baltistan Council is an evident example of internal colonization. The legislative assembly is subservient to the council, which is not directly elected by the people of Gilgit-Baltistan and is at the discretion of the prime minister of Pakistan. It is the worst kind of internal colonization.

The appointments in higher judiciary in Gilgit-Baltistan are carried out on an ad hoc basis by the government of Pakistan. Subjects like power, forest and minerals have been given to the Gilgit-Baltistan Council for policy formulation. The top civil officers, like the chief secretary and inspector general of police, have traditionally never been from the area. This tradition is not based on a written policy, but the federal government always adheres to it.

The state land in Gilgit-Baltistan is termed *khalisa* land, which was the term used in the former Dogra Raj before partition. The customary laws related to land have almost been abandoned, and the federal government controls the land, and there have been many disputes over it. The minerals are extracted by either non-local companies or government-owned institutions. The state imposes homogeneity through a standardized curriculum and education system, undermining the region's local wisdom, indigenous knowledge, and linguistic and cultural diversity. As religious fundamentalism is promoted, the spectre of sectarian violence is present in all forms and shades.

The local people are frustrated mainly because of the federal government policies that perpetuate internal colonization. Whenever human rights defenders and political activists raise these issues, their names are placed on the terrorist watchlist under Schedule IV of the Anti-Terrorism Act 1997 to curtail their movement and impede their work. Freedom of expression is curtailed, voices gagged, and people are forced to impose a self-censorship upon themselves. The result is more discontentment and frustration.<sup>4</sup>

This is very much in resonance with Dad's (2016) argument on the issue of identity articulation in a contested borderland, in which he says that 'In the particular socio-cultural and political setting of Gilgit-Baltistan, the encounter with modernity during the colonial and post-colonial period gradually deprived people of ideographs that made sense of self, society, state and the world.' As a result, he adds, 'people lost their traditional worldview and institutions. At the same time local people could not become part of the state's mainstream institutions owing to the existing disconnection between people and representative institutions.'

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4 Personal communication with the author.

# Recommendations

The primary responsibility for liberation from cultural and political domination lies with the communities that remain its victims. Within that group, the native intellectual is primarily responsible for challenging the colonial narrative and working towards the reinstatement of the community's dignity and self-esteem. However, the native intellectuals from these communities are more often than not co-opted by the colonial project through public education. It is of utmost importance that he must be at home with his people again and work with them to set the direction for emancipation from internal colonialism.

The colonizers, both external and internal, can never empathize with subjugated communities and nations. Therefore, the indigenous peoples must be active on the academic, intellectual, social, economic, and political fronts to do away with perpetuating domination. The most important front is political because all other fronts are subordinate to the political machinations of hegemonic groups. Politics must be done at both class and identity levels. Within the framework of the constitution, the marginalized groups will have to struggle for changes in the constitution and policies in favour of the colonized nations. The ideas from New Localism<sup>5</sup> could be adapted for the rural and peripheral region of Northern Pakistan, emphasising the sharing of economic and natural resources among the region, province and federation. More inclusion of the local people in decision-making on issues of their lands, languages, cultures and resources becomes imperative.

The Pakistani state, along with the federal and provincial government, needs to pay attention to the muffled voices on the cultural, linguistic and political issues raised by marginalized communities. The coercive measures the state has been applying constantly create a backlash and unrest among these communities. The following recommendations are made for political parties, elected representatives and federal and provincial governments.

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5 New Localism is 'about the multiple sources and untapped potential of local power that can make cities and regions unrivalled engines of economic growth, inclusion, and renewal.' See Katz and Nowak (2017).

- The communities who speak endangered languages should be declared indigenous through a constitutional amendment so that indigenous rights to lands and other resources are granted.
- Specific arrangements should be made immediately to make Gilgit-Baltistan a de jure province with full representation in the parliament. Alternatively, it should be given a status similar to that of Azad Jamu and Kashmir, with more autonomy over its internal affairs.
- Specific bodies for research, promotion and revitalization of endangered languages should be formed at provincial and federal levels.
- Policies should be made to conserve and promote tourist areas in Northern Pakistan, focusing on local ownership and livelihood.
- Religious extremism in areas like Diamer, Tangir, Darel, Kohistan, Dir and Swat must be immediately reined in as it has been posing challenges to lives and peace in Northern Pakistan.

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