

**Movements of Autonomy in Gilgit Baltistan: Domestic Pressure and International
Implications**



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Dedications

The research is dedicated to all the people who supported and encouraged me.

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Abstract

Gilgit-Baltistan, a region situated at the crossroad of South and Central Asia has a geopolitical importance, due to its link to the unresolved issue of Kashmir and its strategic position within the project of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Since independence, the region exists in a state of constitutional ambiguity due to its historical association with the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. However, this ambiguity caused a complexities interplay between development, identity, and governance, intensifying local demands for autonomy and accountability. To understand these complexities, the thesis focuses on the dynamics of autonomy movements in Gilgit-Baltistan, exploring how domestic political pressure and international developments shaped the region's quest for constitutional identity. The study examines some projects such as CPEC, Diamer-Basha Dam and mining venture that somehow amplified grievance related to resource exploitation, environmental degradation, and exclusion from decision making process. Some of the local autonomy movements such as the Awami Action Committee (AAC) and the Balawaristan National Front (BNF) emerged as a critical voices and significant platforms demanding constitutional right, full-fledged provincial status, and control over the natural resources. These autonomy movements are not rooted in separatism but a struggle for inclusive governance and recognition within Pakistan.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

The contemporary political landscape of South Asia is shaped by its colonial past. The concepts of sovereignty, borders and the nation-state introduced which fuel intra-state and inter-states conflicts in the region. Among the different problematic colonial notions, the concepts of sovereignty and fixed borders were imposed by the British colonizers, who deliberately overlooked the complexities of the region for their own interests. The issue was not the existence of border but how they were demarcated, impacting the long-standing communal ties¹. These arbitrary borders are the key factors for wars and tensions between states such as Pakistan, India, China, and Afghanistan. In addition to this, centralized institutionalized structure, rooted in the Western legal rational norms was imposed that ignored the flexible and decentralized governance tradition of pre-colonial South Asia. The centralized bureaucratic model replaced personalized system of patronage, thereby alienating people from the center of power. During the time of imperialism, British Empire viewed the region of Africa and Asia primarily as a source of raw materials and for that reason, the colonies were exploited for natural resources. These geopolitical dynamics, along with colonial era arbitrary borders and exploitative policies have a consequence on post-colonial states in South Asia. These resulted in fragmented policies, contested borders and neocolonial power structures. The post colonialism prevailed due to the failure of decolonization, where areas are merged into larger political units. The cause of this failure is the decisions made by colonial powers and the international community as well as the complex historical and geopolitical factors. Even after the ending of colonial rule, colonialism continued to pose threats in post-colonial state building.

Considering the political trajectory of Pakistan, it is still shaped by its colonial past. Pakistan inherited and perpetuated colonial style bureaucratic, military, and judicial institutions to maintained social hierarchies and centralized control, marginalizing diverse groups.

In case of GB, the political landscape is shaped by the colonial legacies of fragmented policies, geopolitical importance, and strategic location. Surrounded by the Karakoram and Himalayas

¹ Ajay Pratap Singh, Vivek Sugandh, "Colonial Legacy: An Impediment to Regional Integration in South Asia," *Vivekananda International Foundation*, January 25, 2019, <https://www.vifindia.org/article/2019/january/25/colonial-legacy-an-impediment-to-regional-integration-in-south-asia>.

Mountain ranges, GB occupies strategic position at the crossroad of South Asia, China, and Central Asia. Having borders with Afghanistan through Wakhan Corridor to the northeast, India's through the Ladakh region in the east, China's Xinjiang province to the northeast, the region of GB acted as a bridge connecting three nuclear armed states². The constitutional and political status of GB is a vivid example of fragmented policies adopted by the British Rule which is still visible in the post-independence era. Being a part of larger disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir, the region of Gilgit-Baltistan could not be integrated fully in Pakistan, leading to a constitutional limbo and limited political representation. This also prevented GB from achieving provincial status within Pakistan as such move perceived as weakening Pakistan's position on the Kashmir issue in international forums³. The current situation is because of the British-imposed borders, which failed to consider GB's ethnic and communal complexities. Do the people of the region considered themselves to be a part of Kashmir?

To have a de facto control over GB, Pakistan introduced series of laws, governed through presidential orders. The local legislative assembly (currently the GB Governance Order 2018) and judicial institutions have limited authority; these institutions did not have full constitutional power⁴. As the region did not fall under the direct ambit of the 1973 constitution of Pakistan, selective provisions of the Constitution are applied when formally validated, sustaining dual legal system and reinforcing GB's ambiguous status. Consequently, GB is neither a province nor an autonomous region.

Since independence of Gilgit-Baltistan, number of governance reforms have been introduced aiming for political and administrative empowerment, but these have fallen short of granting full constitutional integration. From the abolition of the FCR in 1974 to the GB Self Governance Order of 2018, reforms have been introduced but the federal bureaucratic control remained strong, having upper hand over revenue, resources and legislative matters. Many local voices that these reforms

² Kriti M. Shah, "The Kashmir That India Lost: A Historical Analysis of India's Miscalculations on Gilgit Baltistan," *ORF Online*, June 30, 2024, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-kashmir-that-india-lost-a-historical-analysis-of-india-s-miscalculations-on-gilgit-baltistan>.

³ Karim Ahmed, "The Case of Gilgit Baltistan," *RSIL*, October 24, 2022, <https://rsilpak.org/2022/the-case-of-gilgit-baltistan/>.

⁴ Noor Ejaz, "The Gilgit Baltistan Constitutional Crisis," *RSIL*, October 26, 2022, <https://rsilpak.org/2022/the-gilgit-baltistan-constitutional-crisis/>.

failed to fully acknowledge GB as an administrative unit with autonomy under Pakistan⁵. The central dominance over the region's political legislative, and economic affairs continued to prevail. For all these reasons, there has been increasing called for autonomy driven by its ambiguous constitutional status and limited self-governance. Many local political and nationalist leaders demand that GB should be granted full provincial status within Pakistan. They pointed out that in India, under the provision of Article 370, Jammu and Kashmir enjoyed constitutional autonomy, giving it a special autonomous status (although this was revoked in 2019), while Azad Jammu and Kashmir also has its own constitution and functions with having significant autonomy under Pakistan Authority⁶. Both the regions have independent judiciary and executive. In contrast, GB remained outside constitutional order of Pakistan and controlled through the federal Ministry of Kashmir Affairs and governed by presidential orders. Due to all this, there has been increased in autonomy movements in GB, evolving from one of the most vibrant and early political movements like the Balawaristan National Front (BNF) to the current activism by the Awami Action Committee (AAC), leading major demonstrations, focusing on the regional issues of resource exploitation, economic development and full constitutional recognition. In addition, despite being excluded from a constitutional framework, the region is simultaneously including for the geopolitical projects like China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The region is significant for Pakistan for the initiative like Diamer-Bhasha Dam and mining. For that, there has been called upon the control over regional natural resources, abolishing land related law. There has been shift in the autonomy movement from party centric approach to mass civic mobilization, uniting broader sections of society. Gilgit- Baltistan's struggle is not for an independent state nor these movements led by diverse groups have separatist tendencies. They wanted the locals to have internal self-determination and to fully integrate into the political system of Pakistan. As mentioned in the United Nation Charter, the right to self-determination is the most important principle accepted by all the civilized nations. There are two major forms of self-determination as outlined by Higgin: external and internal. External self-determination is the right to secession, wanting to have an independent state. On the other hand, the internal is more about people's rights and to determine

⁵ "Gilgit-Baltistan: The Long Wait for a Constitutional Identity Human Rights Commission of Pakistan," *HRCP*, accessed 1st June 2025, <https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2022-Gilgit-Baltistan-The-long-wait-for-a-constitutional-identity.pdf>.

⁶ *Ibid.*

its existing political, economic, and social destiny within an existing state⁷. In context of GB, the nationalist leaders focused on the internal self-determination, to be fully treated as a citizen of Pakistan. These demands somehow show a genuine grievance of the local community as they genuinely wanted to enjoy the full status of citizenship.

1.2 Problem statement

Gilgit-Baltistan represented one of the most complex constitutional and political dilemmas in South Asia. Rooted in the unresolved Kashmir dispute, GB has been excluded from full provincial status and lacks political representation in central government of Pakistan, leaving its people in a state of constitutional limbo and uncertain political identity. On the other hand, GB occupies a strategic and economic position within Pakistan, especially in the context of CPEC, Diamer Bhasha Dam and the recent announcing of mining. The contradiction between the economic centrality of GB in Pakistan's national agenda and its political exclusion further fuels the demands for representation, autonomy, and recognition. The study looks at the implication of this constitutional paradox for the political mobilization and identity formation.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The aim of the study is to comprehensively analyze the constitutional, political, and geopolitical complexities surrounding Gilgit-Baltistan. The major objectives are:

- To examine the constitutional ambiguity of Gilgit-Baltistan. This has been done by considering the unresolved dispute between Jammu and Kashmir and how it evolved historically and politically over the period.
- To analyze the evolution of autonomy movements in GB in response to the policies of the Pakistani state.
- To examine the effect of Pakistan's denial of giving full provincial status to Gilgit-Baltistan. Pakistan somehow is adopting a paradoxical approach. On one hand, Pakistan denied giving full provincial statuses to GB due to its stance on the Kashmir issue, while on the other hand, through project like CPEC utilizing the region as critical corridor. This has led to intensifying local demands for constitutional recognition and autonomy. This is being

⁷ Noor Ejaz, "The Gilgit Baltistan Constitutional Crisis," *RSIL*, October 26, 2022, <https://rsilpak.org/2022/the-gilgit-baltistan-constitutional-crisis/>.

done by examining domestic, political, and socio-economic factors that drive these demands.

1.4 Research Questions

1. How does the unresolved issue of Jammu and Kashmir contribute to the constitutional ambiguity of Gilgit-Baltistan?
2. How some of the autonomy movements in Gilgit-Baltistan evolved in response to the policies and practices adopted by the State of Pakistan?
3. Amid Gilgit-Baltistan's strategic and economic significance, how Pakistan's denial of provincial status to GB fueled local autonomy movements and calls for political recognition?

1.5 Literature Review

There has been diverse academic discourse and debate over the question that whether historically, the region of GB is being part of the state of Jammu and Kashmir or not. There is a different interpretation of the Kashmir issue and Gilgit Baltistan, each grounded in distinct historical, political, and cultural analyses. Among the international scholars, Sökefeld has extensively study the historical and political discourse of GB. He argued in his article that Indian official map showed GB as an integral part (J&K). All these claims are rooted in the post-1947 interpretation rather than historical reality. He said that the popular discourse within GB itself often rejected identification with Kashmir, asserting to have a separate region identity and history different from J&K⁸. Flowerday also highlighted the same point that colonial control of the Gilgit Agency, nothing that the region was administrated by British India was not straightforwardly tied to Kashmir. He argued that the association with the Kashmir dispute is a product of post-colonial statecraft and rivalry between the two states⁹. N. Ali provided empirical evidence that the huge portion of GB's youth and stakeholder did not consider themselves to be Kashmiri. They believed that the region got

⁸ Martin Sökefeld, "'Not Part of Kashmir, but of the Kashmir Dispute': The Political Predicaments of Gilgit-Baltistan," In *Kashmir: History, Politics, Representation*, ed by Chitralkha Zutshi, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) 132.

⁹ Julie Flowerday, "Identity Matters: Hunza and the Hidden Text of Britain and China," *South Asian History and Culture* 10, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19472498.2019.1576299>.

independence from the Kashmiri Raja and have its own unique cultural and historical trajectory¹⁰. Dad, a prominent scholar from Gilgit-Baltistan emphasized on a distinct historical and cultural identity, separated from that of Kashmir Valley. He argued that GB should not be just view as a subset of Kashmir issue because it presented a fragmented and incomplete picture. It is important to look at the region's unique socio-political dynamics. However, on the other hand, scholars such as Qasim, Hussain, and Ali pointed out that the region is politically incorporated into Pakistan after 1947¹¹. They argued that Kashmir issue has been crucial in shaping GB's political status and administrative structures, thus its fate is link to the Kashmir issue. Nosheen Ali, in her ethnographic work, also placed GB within a landscape of the Kashmir conflict, calling that GB's ambiguous status is both the product and reflection of the larger territorial dispute between India and Pakistan¹². Bouzas explored that there is a shift in sense of belonging among the local of GB, pointing that the region is administratively tied to the Kashmir dispute but local identities challenging this imposed association¹³. This showed a complex interplay between regional, national, and historical narratives. So, the literature demonstrated a diverse spectrum where some arguing GB's distinct historical identity and questioning its inclusion in the Kashmir issue while other view this as a region, historical and administrative linked to Kashmir, shaped by colonial legacies and post-Partition geopolitics.

On International grounds, the future of GB is link to the broader Kashmir issue, particularly the UN resolution of 1948 and subsequent years, call for a plebiscite to determine the status of entire former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir¹⁴. However, many scholars pointed out that the

¹⁰ N. Ali, Muhammad Azhar Mian, S. Akhtar, Sarfraz Batool and Sidra Akram, " Public Perception towards the myth of Constitutional Status in Gilgit-Baltistan," *Humanities & Social Sciences Reviews* 9, no 3 (2021): 730, <https://doi.org/10.18510/hssr.2021.9372>.

¹¹ Muhammad Qasim, Safdar Hussain, and Kousar Ali, "Political Evolution in Gilgit Baltistan: A Historical Analysis of Governance Structures and Regional Dynamics," *Journal of Asian Development Studies* 13, no. 1 (February 28, 2024): 348, <https://doi.org/10.62345/jads.2024.13.1.29>.

¹² Nosheen Ali, "Delusional States," June 5, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108609166>.

¹³ Antia Mato Bouzas, "Mixed Legacies in Contested Borderlands: Skardu and the Kashmir Dispute," *Geopolitics* 17, no. 4 (October 2012): 876, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2012.660577>.

¹⁴ Syed Muhammad Abbas Mosvi, "Gilgit-Baltistan and the Ongoing Politics of Ambiguity," in *Society and Politics of Jammu and Kashmir*, ed. Hussain (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2021), 103.

resolution did not mention GB by name or address its political status separately. This region is submerged into the Kashmir issue, leaving its specific status unaddressed in international law. Because of this, Pakistan continued to link the region's future to the UN resolution on Kashmir. Consequently, GB has not been formally integrated as a province. Despite the calling of the locals to be fully integrated into Pakistan, the region remained in a constitutional limbo for more than 75 years. This led for the demand for autonomy.

Autonomy by its definition is a concept by which there is an arrangement of power sharing between the central authority and subnational government. There are number of reasons by which periphery government demand greater power for itself. The first important reason is that local government understand the needs and challenges of the locals and calls for greater control over the affairs. On the other hand, sometimes the locals refused the power of the central government due to economic, political, and social grievances. Mostly the disputed and occupies territories are the one susceptible to central authority. The locals do not perceive the government to be their representative. In some of the cases, the central authority also violates human rights and oppressed the people, causing major concerns among the local people and hence they desire for autonomy and self-governance. Before delving into autonomy movements, it is important to understand the conceptual foundation of autonomy. Autonomy is the ability of a region to organize their affair without any interference from others. In territorial autonomy there is a decentralization of power and more power to be given to the territorial government from the central authority or government. Autonomy is seen as an effective phenomenon to govern any concerning minorities. However, if the legitimate autonomy is not provided to the area in question, it can lead to a starting of autonomy movements. Throughout the world, the autonomy movements started as a response to political, economic, and cultural marginalization. These movements sometimes seek for self-governance, recognition, or independence from the central government. There is diverse context of these movements such as the Indigenous and peasant struggle in Latin America, regional and ethnic movements in Asia and Europe and demands for decentralization of power in urban areas¹⁵. The literature showed that these movements are shaped by history, state policies, and the global trends. Key movements include the Kurdish movement in Turkey and Syria, Zapatista movement in Mexico, Catalonia in

¹⁵ Gustavo Moura de Oliveira and Monika Weronika Dowbor, "Dynamics of Autonomous Action in Social Movements: From Rejection to Construction," *Latin American Perspectives* 47, no. 5 (August 19, 2020): 55, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582x20939965>.

Spain and the indigenous movements in Bolivia and Ecuador. The scholars mentioned different forms of autonomy such as territorial and non-territorial autonomy, de jure and de facto autonomy. These movements arise because of exclusion, neoliberal reforms and are non-hierarchical organization, focusing on local agenda. They adopted range of strategies from negotiation to institutionalized of demands. These movements can have separatist tendencies and motivations. Sometimes these movements achieve recognition and legal autonomy and sometimes they faced repression by the state.

The autonomy movements in GB are shaped by number of factors such as shifting of sovereignties from local princely state to Dogra rule and later by the British rulers and eventual accession to Pakistan in 1947-48. As mentioned before, despite their affiliation to Pakistan, the remained in constitutional limbo, denied full citizenship, largely because of its association with Kashmir dispute. This ambiguous status has developed a sense of marginalization and increased the demand for self-determination, integration, and autonomy. The most crucial point to mentioned is that these movements in GB are not separatist in nature, as they wanted to fully integrate with Pakistan.

As Pakistan administered this region, Sökefeld termed it as “postcolonial colonialism.”¹⁶ Firstly, it was Karachi Agreement 1949 by which Pakistan controlled GB. Through this treaty, the power to governed GB transferred from AJK to the government of Pakistan. Secondly, A legal code-named Frontier Crime Regulation (FCR), officially introduced by British in 1901 to controlled subcontinent indirectly was also used by Pakistan to control Gilgit Baltistan for 25 years¹⁷. By this rule, locals do not have any public and political rights, and all the powers rested to political agents. After several protests in the 1960s, this legal framework was abolished. By 1970, there was a rise of political movements shaping the local events. The nationalist movement relies on traditional kinship networks. Number of nationalist groups are active with the Karakorum National Movement (KNM) and Balawaristan National Front (BNF Naji) being popular political debates¹⁸.

¹⁶ Martin Sökefeld, “‘Not Part of Kashmir, but of the Kashmir Dispute’: The Political Predicaments of Gilgit-Baltistan,” In *Kashmir: History, Politics, Representation*, ed by Chitrakha Zutshi, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) 138.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Aziz Ali Dad, “Power, Parties and Politics in the Liminal Space of Gilgit-Baltistan,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of New Directions in Kashmir Studies*, ed. Haley Duschinski · Mona Bhan Cabeiri DE Bergh Robinson (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2023), 100.

They have a significant presence in public spaces and contribute to the ongoing political debates about autonomy, governance, and identity in the region. KNM being founded in 1986 by some students from GB studying in Karachi. Drawing their inspiration from Baluch nationalism, KNM wanted unified GB exceeding divisions based on sects, language, or tribal affiliation. The movement called for the rights to have constitutional integrations, provincial status and seats in National Assembly of Pakistan. They asserted that locals should have autonomy over natural resources. In comparison to other nationalist parties, KNM has established its presence across the region. And its candidates also secured seats in local assembly. Among the other nationalist movements, Balawaristan National Front (BNF) is the key one¹⁹. Grievance is not limited to nationalist leaders; mainstream politicians repeatedly highlighted the issue on the status of GB. The major concern they showed about the “State Subject Rule.” By this, the state has no restriction on buying land in this politically sensitive region. Nosheen Ali in her book described that GB is in a space between belonging and unbelonging. Sometimes there is an inclusion and sometimes there is rejection. The people of GB are experiencing a situation which she termed as “Pakistan indifference.”

In 2009, the introduction of Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order along with the 2018 Governance Order is the most significant initiatives by the central government in granting limited autonomy to GB. The reforms established a legislative assembly, a chief minister, and a quasi-provincial status. However, the major power related to natural resources and key economic sectors remained with the federal controlled Gilgit-Baltistan Council. The 2018 order aiming to further decentralizing the government structure, however, the bureaucratic control and lack of genuine political limited its effectiveness²⁰. Despite these reforms, GB’s local leader showed concern regarding the limited autonomy, lack of constitutional integration and the need for empowered local governance.

¹⁹ Aziz Ali Dad, “Power, Parties and Politics in the Liminal Space of Gilgit-Baltistan,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of New Directions in Kashmir Studies*, ed. Haley Duschinski · Mona Bhan Cabeiri DE Bergh Robinson (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2023), 101.

²⁰ Muhammad Qasim, Safdar Hussain, and Kousar Ali, “Political Evolution in Gilgit Baltistan: A Historical Analysis of Governance Structures and Regional Dynamics,” *Journal of Asian Development Studies* 13, no. 1 (February 28, 2024): 348, <https://doi.org/10.62345/jads.2024.13.1.29>.

In recent times, the coalition of different parties, such as the activities by the Awami Action Committee played a pivotal role in political participation in the region. They act as a platform for mobilization support, citizen engagement. This coalition pointed out the unique socio-political challenges and historical marginalization. It helped to raise voices in the political process. As the region is having complex sectarian identities and horizontal inequalities, which contributed to social tension and conflict. The social group such as AAC played a crucial role in bridging a sectarian divide, calling for unity and action on shared grievances on issues such as constitutional rights, resource allocation, and equitable development²¹.

As GB's importance on international forum increased after the announcement of CPEC. However, a section of nationalist leaders showed concern regarding the policies of Islamabad. They pointed out that there is a transparency gap due to lack of engagement. There is a sense of marginalization, and they believed that the central government is insensitive to their needs. They called out the exploitative policies causing economic disparities and uneven distribution of CPEC benefits. Their natural resources are being exploited without giving fair compensation or royalties. Because of the disputed status of the region, they are sidelined in a key decision-making process, especially related to CPEC. The influx of Chinese corporations causing economic distortions to the local businesses.²² Large projects are either given to foreign or military companies further disempowering the locals. The national leaders also showed concern over land grabbing, where the resident displaced without giving fair compensation. This further deepened the rift between the locals and the government. Another pressing issue for Gilgit-Baltistan is the potential demographic shift that CPEC could bring. With migration from other provinces like Punjab and the influx of Chinese laborers, local populations may soon become minorities in their own land. The potential for heightened sectarian violence and terrorism could exacerbate this demographic change, forcing locals, especially minorities, to flee. This demographic restructuring, combined with rising

²¹ Nayyar Abbas et al., "Horizontal Inequalities, Sectarian Identities, and Violent Conflict: The Case of Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan," *Contemporary Islam* 17 (March 7, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-023-00517-w>.

²² Shahid Hussain, Sajjad Ali, Aneela Qamar, "The perspective of the local community of Gilgit-Baltistan is the key to CPEC," *Pakistan Journal of International Affairs* 6, no. 3 (2023): 110, <https://doi.org/10.52337/pjia.v6i3.882>.

intolerance and radicalism in Pakistan, poses a threat to the region's social fabric, with minorities potentially becoming scapegoats for any perceived CPEC failures²³.

Similarly, the project of Diamer Basha Dam is one of the most significant projects of Pakistan. The project has led to displacement of thousands of residents. Research documents showed that the dam construction and delays caused grievances due to economic, social challenges. There have been the practices of unfair land acquisition, inadequate compensations, and uncertainty about future. This became a source of conflict between the local and the authorities. The literature highlighted that the local rights often being overlooked in favor of national development, leading to persistent grievances. This project also caused increased in carbon footprint and threats to the sustainable livelihood²⁴. Due to this, the nationalist leader argued that the benefit from dam is for the state, but the cost of displacement, cultural loss and environmental harm is a gift for the locals.

1.6 Research Gap

The existing literature showed that the legal ambiguity of Gilgit-Baltistan, agreements like the 1949 Karachi Agreement and reforms such as the limited 2009 and 2018 self-governance created constitutional limbo and the strategic importance of the region in projects like CPEC intensified external interest, but several critical aspects remain underexplored. Firstly, the policy impact assessment is underexplored linking some of the policies to the escalation of autonomy demands. There is a lack of in-depth analyses linking Pakistan's policy to the region's autonomy mobilization. The study based on the episodes of protests and autonomy movement from independence till today is absent. Existing literature is on some of the autonomy movements, those led by Awami Action Committee especially in the years of 2024-2025 remained underexplored. Scholar focused and noted the CPEC's strategic relevance and these influenced local autonomy narratives and the formation of pressure groups. Similarly, regarding the Diamer-Bhasha Dam, there is a limited direct analysis of the specific concerns or mobilization efforts of GB's nationalist leaders. Addressing these gaps would help to understand how the policies choices by Pakistan translate into organized autonomy movements and how the region geostrategic importance shaped

²³ Shahid Hussain, Sajjad Ali, Aneela Qamar, "The Perspective of the local community of Gilgit-Baltistan is the key to CPEC," *Pakistan Journal of International Affairs* 6, no. 3 (2023): 110, <https://doi.org/10.52337/pjia.v6i3.882>.

²⁴ Muhammad Ilyas et al., "Development-Induced Displacement and Resettlement Project Delay Impacts on Affected People: A Case Study of Diamer Basha Dam Project in Pakistan," *Sustainability* 17, no. 6 (March 9, 2025): 2387, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su17062387>.

the trajectory of GB's quest for full provincial status. To understand these complexities better, the thesis incorporated multiple theoretical frameworks such as Constructivism, Subaltern Studies, and Decolonial theory. By linking the state policies to mobilization, this study reveals how the actions by the state actively foster the very resistance it aims to quell. This very much helped to understand the political dynamics of GB.

1.7 Research Methodology

This part of the study deals with the methodology and data collection techniques that are being used for research. Research as a concept includes wide range of interpretations, based on the opinion of an expert or the specific field of study. One can simply defined research as a thorough explanation and exploration of subject, or idea having a particular goal. The aim of a researcher is either to expand the knowledge existing before or delve into theoretical exploration²⁵. Methodology, however, explains how research questions have been approached and what questions are being addressed over a particular domain. The findings of such research usually highlight its significance and relevance. Research typically involves a systematic investigation of phenomena, in which data is measured or collected and then analyzed to identify patterns, differences, or changing trends²⁶.

1.7.1 Ontology of the study

Ontology is a branch of philosophy concerned with the nature of reality and understanding the nature of existence and it asked a fundamental question like "what exists?" In simpler words, it helps to understand the core of reality. Ontology focused on our believed system to question what is real. It compels us to think that the world we see is actual reality or just an illusion²⁷. It also deals with the concept of how people gain the knowledge and share it with others. So, in research, your ontological position defines what to believe about the nature of the world you are studying. There are two core assumption of Ontology:

²⁵ Mimansha Patel and Nitin Patel, "Exploring Research Methodology: Review Article," *International Journal of Research & Review* 6, no. 3 (March 2019): 50, https://www.ijrjournal.com/IJRR_Vol.6_Issue.3_March2019/IJRR0011.pdf.

²⁶ Gowin, D. Bob, and Jason Millman, "Research Methodology: A Point of View," *Review of Educational Research* 39, no. 5(1969): 555, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3516009>.

²⁷ Scandura, Terri A., and Ethlyn A. Williams, "Research Methodology in Management: Current Practices, Trends, and Implications for Future Research." *The Academy of Management Journal* 43, no. 6(2000): 1248-64. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1556348>.

1. Objectivism

2. Constructionism

Objectivism is of the opinion that reality is an external phenomenon, exists on its own, regardless of what we think about it and is independent of the actors involved. It also suggests that people see the world, independent of the opinion about it. According to this, events happen for specific reasons and to understand the reasons it is crucial to look at the condition around it. Fact, structure, and institutions are tangible realities for the objectivist. On the other hand, constructivism believed it is subjective experiences that shaped realities. And these realities are created through interaction and discourse. For constructivist, there is an outside world, which is by our thoughts and social interactions, so reality keeps changing based on how we perceive and understand it²⁸.

This study adopted the framework of constructivist ontology. The political realities of GB including the identity of the region, its constitutional status and the meaning of autonomy are not objective or pre-determined fact. Instead, these are the realities continuously constructed and challenged through different narratives and discourses. The status of the region as a disputed territory is a constructed phenomenon maintained by the narratives of Pakistan, India, and the international community. On the other hand, there are clash of narratives regarding identity between the state and local constructed identity.

1.7.2 Epistemology of the study

Epistemology, being a branch of philosophy deals with the understanding of knowledge. If the ontology asks the question like what the nature of reality is? then epistemology would ask how we know that reality? Epistemology takes us on a journey to uncover and to know about the origins and the truth of what we know. It questions about the essence of knowledge, how it is being gathered and how to ensure that it is valid or not²⁹. In simple words, it acted as a guidebook that helps to understand how we gather information, how we process it, and how we share it with others.

²⁸ Scandura, Terri A., and Ethlyn A. Williams, "Research Methodology in Management: Current Practices, Trends, and Implications for Future Research." *The Academy of Management Journal* 43, no. 6(2000): 1248-64. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1556348>.

²⁹ Katie Moon and Deborah Blackman, "A guide to ontology, epistemology, and philosophical perspectives for interdisciplinary researchers," *Integration and Implementation Insights*, May 2, 2017, <https://i2insights.org/2017/05/02/philosophy-for-interdisciplinarity/>.

There are two main assumptions of epistemology: positivism and interpretivism.

Positivism believed that society is shaped by individual and the tool for enquiry is done objectively, knowledge is gained through our senses, and the nature of knowledge is tangible, and the world exists outside of our perceptions and that clear facts shape our knowledge. It can be acquired by collecting facts and examining human behavior. On the other hand, interpretivism thinks that knowledge is based on subjective enquiry, that research and our understanding of the world are interconnected³⁰. This means that facts are not always black and white. In this perspective, findings are often colored by the researcher's personal views.

As the study investigates the movement of autonomy in GB, interpretivist epistemology is applied. This research is not guided by a single, objective truth but seek to induced knowledge through systemic interpretation of the meanings, discourse and realities that define the political status and autonomy movements in GB. This showed that there is a variation of perspective regarding GB as a territory. Pakistan constructed it differently and the local nationalist leaders have distinct perspective. This research is not to know which one of the stories is correct, rather to use interpretivist lens to analyze the language, symbols, and arguments to answer one simple question; how different competing stories shape the political struggle and reality. For that, it is important to consider meanings, past events, and experiences. Through interpreting meaning of all these, deeper understanding of the fact would be achieved.

1.7.3 Research Approach

Research approach is the planning and strategy to uncover the truth. It is acting as a bridge to connect research questions to the data gathered. There are two main ways to do so: the inductive and deductive methods. Both have their pros and cons. The inductive method is a “bottom-up” approach, starting with a specific observation and look for pattern to build a new theory and understanding. It is like exploring a city without map, your observe everything and then draw your own map. In research begins by collecting data that is relevant to the topic of the researcher. Deductive, on the other hand is opposite of inductive. It is a “top bottom” approach starting with general theory and test it with specific data. It started with a broad theory that the researcher finds

³⁰ Ma Junjie and Ma Yingxin, “The Discussions of Positivism and Interpretivism,” *Global Academic Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 4, no. 1 (2022): 11, <https://doi.org/10.36348/gajhss.2022.v04i01.002>.

compelling and then narrow to specific conclusion. It is like you have a map (theory) and you go into city to see if the map is accurate or not³¹.

This thesis is based on a deductive research approach to understand the autonomy movements in GB. It is guided by different theoretical frameworks being discussed later.

1.7.4 Research Strategy

Research strategy is a path which is used to conduct research. It acted as a roadmap to guide the research journey. So, it decides the direction of the research. It is a plan providing basic information about the topic. Based on the research strategy, data collection and analytical methods are being used.

There are two main clusters of research strategies: qualitative and quantitative research.

This study adopted qualitative research, focusing into details, using non-numerical data such as words, images, and pictures. This kind of research is more flexible which allow the researcher to study real life situations. Instead of sticking to a fixed plan, this approach stays open, to better understand realities shaped by social interactions. A range of techniques are used in qualitative research, such as case studies, in-depth interviews, focus groups, and historical analysis³². This study is based on the case study technique to conduct an in-depth examination of autonomy movements in GB. There are different meanings and interpretations of the term “case study.” It usually based on the notion of unit of analysis. This is the most common method to investigate complex social realities. In using this technique, GB is treated as a bounded system revealing the pattern of resistance and state power dynamics. GB is taken as a unit of analysis defined by its unique historical status, constitutional ambiguity and the most importantly the political mobilization calling for autonomy. The case study would allow to systematically analyze multiple data sources including policies of the government, constitutional orders, political manifesto, and scholarly works to understand competing narratives of identity, sovereignty, and rights are constructed and contested.

³¹ Saunders, Mark & Lewis, Philip & Thornhill, Adrian & Bristow, Alex, "Research Methods for Business Students" Chapter 4: Understanding research philosophy and approaches to theory development, March. 2019, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330760964>.

³² Garima Malhotra, "Strategies in Research," *International Journal of Advance Research and Development* 2, no.5 (2017): 178, <https://www.ijarnd.com/manuscripts/v2i5/V2I5-1220.pdf>.

1.7.5 Research Design

Research design acted as a blueprint to guide the researcher to achieve their research goals. It helps to select the method and technique appropriate to address their questions. There are three distinct types of research designs: exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory³³. In this study, explanatory and descriptive designs are being considered. Descriptive would focus on summarizing the key feature of the case such as the specific policies implemented by the central government and the demands and actions of different local movements. And the explanatory component deals with the why and how dynamics of the study. Both these designs are suited for studying under-researched or complex issues like Gilgit-Baltistan's constitutional ambiguity, local autonomy movements, and regional geopolitical dynamics, where both exploration of new insights and detailed description are necessary.

1.7.6 Data Collection

Collecting different information and data is the most vital part of research. Methods for data collection would be different for different subject, but one thing remain the same which is to collect reliable and accurate information. This makes sure that answer is derived from credible sources. There are two sources for data collection: primary and secondary source.

For this study, the data have been collected through both primary and secondary sources³⁴. The data is collected from documentary sources to explore the movements of autonomy in GB, their domestic pressure, and international implications. Because of the challenges posed by severe floods in the region and the arrest of key local nationalist leaders during the planned fieldwork period, so the direct engagement with stakeholders was neither feasible nor ethically appropriate. Consequently, the study is based on wide range of primary and secondary written material that would allow a comprehensive and critical understanding of political narratives and power relation's surrounding GB's political situation.

³³ David Hunter, Jacqueline McCallum, and Dora Howes, "Defining Exploratory-Descriptive Qualitative (EDQ) Research and Considering Its Application to Healthcare" (University of Glasgow, 2019), <https://eprints.gla.ac.uk/180272/7/180272.pdf>.

³⁴ Hamed Taherdoost, "Data Collection Methods and Tools for Research; a Step-By-Step Guide to Choose Data Collection Technique for Academic and Business Research Projects," *International Journal of Academic Research in Management (IJARM)* 10, no. 1 (2021): 38, <https://hal.science/hal-03741847/document>.

The primary data consist of documents and statement by political and governmental actors. This includes official reports, constitutional drafts, speeches, press releases and party manifesto issued by the Government of Pakistan, the Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly, and relevant political parties. For example, the Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance of 2009 and 2018, or the Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) signed between GB government and Chinese companies for mining and infrastructure projects. These documents would be considering as primary source because these are directly from state and political organization and reflect their official positions, intentions, and governance frameworks. In addition to this, statements by the nationalist leaders, members of Awami Action Committee (AAC) and other local representative, when published in their original form are treated as primary evidence.

This study also encompasses wide range of secondary sources which provide analytical and contextual insights into the primary data. This includes academic books by different scholars, articles, policy analyses, media report, and think-tank publications. News article from local and national outlets such as Dawn, The Express, Tribune, Pamir Times and The News International are considered, capturing the evolving political discourse, reports and records of leader statement that reflect public sentiment. Reports by international organization and independent research institutes are also considered.

All the data are collected through official government websites, academic databases, and digital archives. All the documents are reviewed for authenticity, publication date, and relevance to the study's research questions. The data are the organized into various categories such as constitutional status, resource politics, and external involvement.

In short, this combination of primary documentary sources and secondary analytical sources provides both empirical realities and interpretive depth. It helps to critically examine how the Pakistani state, local autonomy movements, and international actors construct competing narratives about the identity of GB.

1.7.8 Data Analysis

For the analysis of the data, thematic analysis would be used. This will enable to identify and interpret different patterns and meanings within the textual data. It helps to understand key themes about the political narrative and question of autonomy. Following Braun and Clarke six-step model is essential for the study, in which data are systematically reviewed, coded, and organized into

major themes³⁵. First is to become familiar with the data which involve repeated reading. Second is generating initial codes with identify and label relevant feature across the entire dataset.

1.7.9 Research ethics

The key component of the research is to ensure the reliability and validity of data. It is a main concern throughout the research. Since the research is based entirely on secondary qualitative data, reliability is maintained using verifies, credible and reputable sources such as academic journals, policy reports, documents and recognized newspapers such as Dawn, the News International, and local news outlets like Pamir Times. Cross-checking and verification are being confirm through diverse sources, minimizing the risk of bias or misinformation.

Whenever possible, official documents and direct statements from leaders were prioritized over interpretive commentary to preserve authenticity and accuracy. To ensure validity, the analysis closely aligned with the research objectives and theoretical framework. Thematic categories derived from the data to ensure that finding emerged organically rather than being imposed for any preconceived assumptions. This work also acknowledges potential limitations of secondary data such as political biasness, partial coverage, and address all of these through critical evaluation and comparison of contrasting opinions and perspectives. Although no primary data collection is being conducted, ethical principles are strictly maintained. All secondary data are properly cited to avoid plagiarism. As the study is based on the sensitive political topic, the research treats leadership statement with respect and neutrality, avoiding any misrepresentation of viewpoints. The study carefully ensures to take the voices of marginalized groups of Gilgit-Baltistan and is consistent with the principle of subaltern and postcolonial research ethics.

In conclusion, source evaluation, methodological transparency, and ethical integrity ensure that the finding of the research is credible and academically sound.

1.8 Significance of the study:

This research contributes significant in the arena of International Relations, especially in terms of territorial disputes and South Asia geopolitics. The region of GB often sidelined from the mainstream discourse of the broader issue of Jammu and Kashmir. It also helps to analyze the

³⁵ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Thematic Analysis," *ResearchGate*, January 2006, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/269930410_Thematic_analysis.

intricate dynamics of autonomy movement in GB. By focusing on both domestic and international dimensions, the research shows how internal political pressures, local movements for identity and the geopolitical importance shape GB's continues struggle for constitutional recognition and provincial status. This will further contribute to a broader discourse of autonomy and self-determination by placing GB not just a contested territory a state authority and local identity continuous to interact. This also study some of the key autonomy movements such as the Balawaristan National Front (BNF), Gilgit-Baltistan United Movement (GBUM), and the recent protest by the Awami Action Committee (AAC). The activities by AAC showed a new phase of mobilization, uniting diverse social groups indorsing for political rights, participatory governance, and resource control. It shows that the movements like the AAC transforming localized grievances into organized political action.

Chapter 2 Theoretical Framework

The thesis will be guided by two theoretical approaches, combining Constructivism from mainstream International Relation's theory and Postcolonial theory from critical political thought. This will help to understand both the constructed nature of political realities and the legacies of colonial marginalization.

2.1 Constructivism

The theory of Constructivism in IR emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as the dominating theories of time, such as Realism and Liberalism could not explain the peaceful end of the Cold War. The arrival of the theory of constructivism in IR is often associated with the work of Nicolas Onuf, who coined this term in 1989 in his book "World of Our Making" where he argued that we live in a world of our own making and rules and speech acts produce social realities. Actors formed by the rules they follow and language they use³⁶. In other words, the world is shaped by the meanings and structures that actors collectively create. Based on this assumption, Alexander Wendt proposed one of the most influential statements in his article, "Anarchy is What States Make of it." He is often considered the founding father of Constructivism. He developed a via media between rationalism and post-structuralism, arguing that state's interests and identities are constructed by the international culture³⁷. He famously presented three cultures of anarchy. Hobbesian meaning enmity, Lockean meaning rivalry and Kantian meaning friendship to illustrate that anarchy can have different meaning based on shared ideas³⁸. This mean that anarchy did not mean that state would operate in self-help or conflict mode, instead the way states perceive of anarchy, their identities and shared meaning determine its behavior. He gave two core assumptions of constructivism, the first is the structures of associations are determined by shared ideas rather than material factors. This means world politics is not simply driven from material interests but rather socially constructed norms, identities, and beliefs. Secondly, things did not have meaning themselves unless it is understood through social contexts. This gives the idea that meaning to anything is not fixed but changed over the period depending on the beliefs and ideas the actor

³⁶ Sarina Theys, "Introducing Constructivism in International Relations Theory," *E-International Relations*, Feb 23, 2018, <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/02/23/introducing-constructivism-in-international-relations-theory/>.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Maysam Behraves, "Constructivism: An Introduction," *E-International Relations*, Feb 3, 2011, <https://www.e-ir.info/2011/02/03/constructivism-an-introduction/>.

holds³⁹. Alexander Wendt highlighted the importance of shared ideas in IR. According to him, these shared ideas constructed the identities and interests of actors. Based on this, states can have multiple identities depending on their view of who they are. These identities later constitute interests and actions. For example, state's identity as a peaceful nation or a global power generates set of interests and predictable actions aligned with that identity.

The central to this concept is the mutual constitution agents and structure. Agency is a capacity of actor that could be individuals, states, or any non-state actors to act intentionally and make independent choices. It called upon the ability to exert power and pursue strategies. Structure in the other hand is an overarching arrangement in the international system that shape and constrain the choices of agents⁴⁰. The main argument surrounding structure as following sociologist Anthony Giddens is that structure is primarily ideational. It is made up of shared norms, ideas, institutions, and cultural practice that provide a context for the action. According to Anthony Giddens, agency and structure are two sides of coin; they cannot exist independently of one another. In 1987 Alexander Wendt drafted an article "The Agent Structure Problem in International Relations Theory." Wendt introduced this sociological debate to IR. He argued that the dominant IR theories were flawed because they were "ontologically primitive," focusing only on one side of the equation. Realism focused on structure and liberalism on agents. According to constructivist, structure shaped the identities and interests of the agents⁴¹. Simultaneously, structure cannot exist independently without agent; they are continuously transforming each other.

Other crucial factor of constructivism is "Strategic Framing" by which any actor could deliberately define and present a situation, and identity that resonated with specific audience to mobilize support and achieve political goals and influence outcomes. The framing is strategic because it is acted as a tool used by actors to change social structure. Thus, strategic framing is a tool within constructivism that links the ideational and social construction of reality with practical influence and power in IR, showing how identities and interests are fluid and constructed through language,

³⁹ Maysam Behraves, "Constructivism: An Introduction," *E-International Relations*, Feb 3, 2011, <https://www.e-ir.info/2011/02/03/constructivism-an-introduction/>

⁴⁰ Sarina Theys, "Introducing Constructivism in International Relations Theory," *E-International Relations*, Feb 23, 2018, <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/02/23/introducing-constructivism-in-international-relations-theory/>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

norms, and social practices rather than fixed or purely material. It contested dominant meanings, challenge existing norms and introduce current ideas about identity, interests, and behaviors.

This framework helped to understand how political identity, territorial claims and national narrative regarding Gilgit-Baltistan are socially constructed rather than fixed. It is a product of ongoing social interactions, processes, and competing narratives. This theory helped to analyze autonomy movements not as simple rebellions but an active agent struggling to redefine the very identity and political status of their homeland. Firstly, the narrative of Pakistani government is profound paradox. The state, through its laws, policies and official discourse has constructed GB's identity as "disputed territory" a status links to the larger Kashmir's dispute. This led to constitutional limbo that is somehow a powerful social fact acting as an ideational structure that is used by state to justify a special administrative status, denying the full political rights as enjoyed by the other provinces of Pakistan. This policy of limbo is a strategy that allow the state actively utilized the region's territory and resources for national strategic projects without granting the political right as the state noted that granting GB full provincial status would jeopardize Pakistan's international stance on Kashmir. As Pakistan rejected the constitutional changes by India in Jammu and Kashmir. Thus, the region is governed by a façade of autonomy. In short, Pakistan formed two conflicting identities of GB. When the goal is economic developments such as Diamer-Basha Dam and mining or geopolitical positioning such as for CPEC, GB becomes an integral part of Pakistan, whose territory is needed for national progress. However, when the goal is to grant political rights, the same region is constructed as a provisional entity, whose final status is hostage to the resolution of the Kashmir issue. A disputed territory becomes strategic gateway; the local resources become national asset and demands for rights becomes foreign inspired unrest.

In response, the local autonomy movement formed a different narrative, constructed a different identity, one rooted in a distinct history and a legacy of self-determination. This identity is not oriented towards secession but strongly towards legitimate autonomy and constitutional rights within Pakistan. It is important to consider whether they view themselves as Kashmiri, Pakistani or any other regional identity. Some of the narratives constructed GB as a victim of internal colonization, where the resources are being exploited without its consent. In this way, constructivism helped to understand that when shared identity is formed around common grievances and experiences, it would form organized political movements such as the Balawaristan

National Front (BNF) or Gilgit-Baltistan United Movement (GBUM)⁴². These movements acted as an agent that actively articulate a resistant identity and mobilized the population. These collective grievances emerged from the region's political marginalization and lack of constitutional status. These movements also used strategic framing to leverage the political constructions to advance their agendas. For example, there was a demand to make this region tax-free zone using the disputed status as a legal argument against the taxation by the federal government. The recent projects in GB created new dimension for the reinforcement of identity and autonomy demands, perfectly explaining how tangible factors are given meaning through social context. For example, the demand by locals for an 80 percent royalty from Diamer-Bhasha Dam is not just an economic claim but also a political one. They constructed the idea of the people of GB as the legitimate owners of the recourse, challenging the state narrative of the dam as a national project⁴³. Additionally, the protests led by the Awami Action Committee (AAC) over different issues, particularly about GB's share in CPEC are form of political agency that redefined the norms of participation and benefit-sharing. These movements seek to alter the social and political structure of society. The protests led by AAC are powerful in attempting to establish a new logic of appropriateness centered on justice and ownership.

In summary, a constructivist analysis shows that the struggle for autonomy in GB is a dynamic process of identity formation. The constitutional limbo and denial of giving a provincial status is not merely a legal vacuum but a socially constructed realities that further fuel grievances and the feeling of being marginalized. Movement like BNF and the activities by AAC are agents that try to articulate this identity and mobilized the people. And lastly the project such as CPEC, Diamer-Bhasha Dam and the mining and lease of the region are not just an economic venture; but are social arenas where the meanings of right, ownership, and autonomy are constantly changing and redefined. The locals' nationalist leaders challenging externally backed ideational projects that aims to normalize a specific vision of GB's future as a transit corridor rather than a homeland with rights.

⁴² Aziz Ali, "Boundaries and Identities: The Case of Gilgit-Baltistan," *Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series*, no. 34 (2016).

⁴³ Tanveer Abbas, "Diamer-Bhasha Dam affectees launch major protest movement," *Hum English*, Feb 10, 2025, <https://humenglish.com/pakistan/diamer-bhasha-dam-affectees-launch-major-protest-movement/>.

2.2 Postcolonial Theory

Additionally, from a critical theoretical domain, to understand the internal dynamics of autonomy movement and the policies adopted by the federal government, Postcolonial Theory would be essential. The theory of postcolonial is a critical post-positivist theoretical framework. It is a multifaceted that considers wide range of cultural, political, economic, and psychological consequences of colonialism by focusing on the exploitation of colonized peoples and their lands⁴⁴. It challenged power structures established by colonial powers. This also helps to understand the legacies of colonialism that continue to shape the world's dimension. The theory started to emerge in an academic sphere from 1960s onward, it engaged with the complex power relationships that sustained colonial rule and that continue to shape contemporary global inequalities and identities. During the early development of the theory, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin defined the theory as the term 'post-colonial' covering every aspect of culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day⁴⁵. After that, many definitions of postcolonialism and other variation of the term expanded and refined the concept of post-colonial theory. The central theme of the theory is its critique of Eurocentrism, which is the privileging of Western European experiences, values as universal superior perspective. They believed that colonial discourses constructed the colonized as irrational, backward, and exotic in contrast to the rationality, modernity, and civilization of the West. They are skeptical toward about universality and objectivity. To fully understand this theory, it is important to comprehend and understand its core concepts and the scholars who developed these ideas.

Postcolonial theory encompasses a range of core concepts introduced by different scholars. Broadly, it can be divided into several strands. The work by Frantz Fanon, who introduced the psychoanalysis of colonialism by studies the psychological and political aspect of colonialism. His work investigated the deep psychological damage inflicted by colonialism. Edward Said introduced the concept of "Orientalism" highlighting how the West constructed the East as something backward inferior and how the west justifies their intervention in the South. He said

⁴⁴ Sheila Nair, "Introducing Postcolonialism in International Relations Theory," *E-International Relations*, 8 Dec, 2017, <https://www.e-ir.info/2017/12/08/postcolonialism-in-international-relations-theory/>.

⁴⁵ "Postcolonial Theory," *EBSCO*, accessed 15 September, 2025, <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/political-science/postcolonial-theory#research-starter-title>.

that the Western discourse divides the world into an us and them structure⁴⁶. Among the different branches of the postcolonial theory, the most relevant strand for the thesis is “Subaltern Studies” and “Decolonial Theory.”

2.2.1 Subaltern Studies

Subaltern Studies, originated in the 1980s was an intellectual project by a group of South Asian historian, led by Ranajit Guha. The central goal was to challenge the existing histories of Indian colonialism and nationalism, which were dominating from the perspective of the elites, mostly either the British rulers or the elitist Indian nationalist. The term “subaltern” was used for the masses, the peasants, tribal communities, laborers, all those who were politically, socially, and geographically outside the dominant power structures. The main argument is that these subaltern groups have their own political consciousness and agency. The actions of subaltern were not just irrational or simple reaction to elite leaderships. Instead, they operated in a distinct domain with its own logic, organization and using their own religious symbols, rumors, and folk traditions⁴⁷. Despite never claiming to be the part of the postcolonial project, the subaltern studies are seen as a subset of postcolonial theory, since its formation.

The major contribution to this study is by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her seminal essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?". In which she argued that the subaltern, particularly the most marginalized (like the poor, subaltern woman), is structurally silenced and are at the absolute bottom of economic, social, and political hierarchies. They cannot speak in way that can be heard and recognized as meaningful within the dominate structure of power and knowledge. The very act of an intellectual researching and "giving voice" to the subaltern is an act of representation that inevitably distorts and re-inscribes their silence within the academic discourse. The true, heterogeneous voice of the subaltern remains irrecoverable, forcing researchers into a position of deep self-reflexivity⁴⁸.

⁴⁶ “Postcolonial Theory,” *EBSCO*, accessed 15 September 2025, <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/political-science/postcolonial-theory#research-starter-title>.

⁴⁷ Gyan Prakash, “Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism,” in *Historiography: Critical Readings* (2021).

⁴⁸ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Die Philosophin* 14, no. 27 (1988): 24–28. <https://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~sj6/Spivak%20CanTheSubalternSpeak.pdf>.

2.2.2 Decolonial Theory

The second crucial strand of post-colonial theory regarding the thesis is Decolonial Theory. This emerged from the work of Latin American scholars such as Anibal Quijano and Walter Dignolo. They make an important distinction between the period of Colonialism and Coloniality. Colonialism is a historical period of political and administrative domination. And Coloniality is a long pattern of hierarchies that was established during colonialism but continue to structure modern world even after gaining independence. The central concept is this is the "Coloniality of Power." Walter further expanded the work of Quijano, proposed a colonial matrix of power to understand different domains of coloniality. It consists of four domains, control of economy, authority, gender, and control of subjectivity⁴⁹. They are of the opinion that the modern system is not just founded on economic exploitation but new social classification that is the invention of race. Placing European at the top of racial hierarchy became the organizing principle for the control of resources and authority. This matrix of power is also epistemic, meaning it privileges Western knowledge, and standards of modernity while dismissing non-Western systems as primitive or invalid. In short, Decolonial Theory provides a macro-level critique of the enduring power structures of the modern world, arguing that we still live in the "thick present" of the colonial era, and it called for a radical delinking from its logic to imagine alternative futures.

By studying the policies adopted by the federal government of Pakistan since independence, the adoption of the Frontier Crimes Regulation to a leading constitutional limo to the last Empowerment Order of 2018 somehow function as an instrument of this coloniality. In contrast, different movements such as Balawaristan National Front (BNF) and the activities and protests conducted by the Awami Action Committee (AAC) embody a subaltern politics of resistance. What they are doing is an epistemic disobedience that challenge the state's hegemonic narrative and demand their rightful place in the political order.

In GB, the struggle and demand for autonomy is not just a regional political dispute but also confrontation with historical narrative and challenging the power structure of the state. By applying both the framework of Subaltern Studies which mainly aimed to recover the agency and focusing on the voice of marginalized group, who has been silenced by the prevalent narrative and

⁴⁹ Ramesh Kumar Sagar, "Imperatives of Decolonization: Insights from Fanon, Quijano, and Dignolo on Colonial Legacy," *Social Science Chronicle* 1, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.56106/ssc.2021.002>.

Decolonial Theory which critiques the enduring coloniality of power established by colonialism, the conflict reveals the struggle over history, knowledge and the right to self-determination.

The FCR being a brutal colonial era law used by the British to control the administer tribal areas. By this, a political agent controlled all the affairs of the regional and entire communities became responsible for individual crimes, thereby suppressing dissent. This created a structure where the locals not seen as citizens but subjects to be managed. As before independence, some of this region being part of the Princely State of Jammu and Kashmir, ruled by a Dogra Maharaja. So, the British did not rule this region directly but control through the ruler. This system of indirect rule created a buffer zone for the Empire. After gaining independence, Pakistan did not fully integrate GB due to the issue of Kasmir but started a form of indirect control. Instead of the Maharaja, authority now shifted to the federal Ministry of Kashmir Affairs and Gilgit-Baltistan. This meant that for decades, the region was ruled by bureaucrats from Islamabad, not by local elected representatives. The 2009 and 2018 Governance Orders, while creating a local assembly, maintain this structure by keeping final power with the federal government, effectively modernizing the colonial model of indirect rule. In addition to this, the State Subject Rule of 1927 was introduced by the Dogra Maharaja to protect the rights of locals from the outside. However, this rule was gradually eroded revoked by 1974. This was a pivotal law to protect the locals. The removal of this law is framed a within the subaltern narrative as a state led policy of demographic changes or internal colonization.

From the perspective of Decolonial Theory, these laws are the components of the coloniality of power. Although, there is a shift in governance from FCR to the Governance Order, however, it is an evolution in form of control not its abolition. In contrast, the demands of the locals for the restoration of the State Subject Rule or a protest land acquisition are the example of subaltern resistance. The persistent grievance over these rules forms a key part of the subaltern historical consciousness that the BNF and AAC tap into for mobilization.

The recent development like the project of CPEC, passing through GB is usually framed as a project of development. If we looked through the prism of decolonial theory, its view is as neo-colonialism. The main decision regarding the project is by central government and China without consulting local population. The projects benefit is towards the center and international partners, while the major social and environmental costs towards the locals. This somehow is a colonial pattern where the periphery's resources and geography are exploited for the economic gain of core.

Similarly, the construction of the massive Diamer-Bhasha Dam and granting mining licenses to outside corporation particularly foreign investor are example of resource colonialism. These projects represent the appropriation of GB's two most vital resources: its water and its minerals. Different demand of the locals' nationalist leaders is dismissed, reinforcing the coloniality of power. On the other hand, the local autonomy movements acted as subaltern agency. They called the problem as "Internal colonialization." And some of the solution provided by these movements are strategically brilliant examples of subaltern agency. For example, the demand of AAC for a tax-free zone, takes the state's own narrative that GB is not a constitutional part of Pakistan and they used it as a logical weapon. They formed an argument that if this region is not a province, then the central government has no right to tax the region. This is not charity but a demand for rights based on state's own narrative. Similarly, the demands by AAC in different protest, calling for the abolition of the "black law" Finance Act or demanding GB's share in CPEC showed that they did not reject development but wanting inclusiveness, ownership, and partnership. Similarly, the unwavering demand for an 80% royalty from the Diamer-Bhasha Dam is a performative claim of sovereignty. They used different slogan like "Our Land, Our Resources" serving as a powerful motivational frame. They connect their political struggle to immediate material realities of land, water, and historical memories. They mobilized people calling for rallies around shared identity and shared grievances.

2.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, the framework such as Constructivism, Subaltern Studies, and Decolonial Theory provided a multi layered analysis. Constructivism revealed the core idea of the battle over the social construction of identity and interests that how the state narrative contradicted with the local nationalist leaders asserting for their identity. On the other hand, Subaltern Studies specify the agency and voice of these movements by analyzing local grievances and their called for demands for royalties and tax-free status. It is within the frame of Decolonial Theory that the constitutional limbo and policies of resource extraction can be situated not as isolated failures of political will but as symptoms of a deeper "coloniality of power."

Chapter 3 Historical Foundation leading to Political Ambiguity of Gilgit-Baltistan

Gilgit- Baltistan, important region sharing borders with China, India, Afghanistan and surrounded by Himalayas and Karakorum range used to be referred as Northern Frontier. It is due to its strategic location and proximity China and Russia⁵⁰. On the other hand, it is also termed as Forgotten Kashmir, as this region is much forgotten compared to the broader Kashmir Issue. This has led to deepening of grievance among the people of Gilgit-Baltistan. So, the major question revolved around Gilgit-Baltistan is how its status becomes intertwined with the issue of Kashmir? This is complex and debated among scholars, political analysts and legal experts regarding whether Gilgit-Baltistan is part of a Kashmir Issue or not. So, to understand this, it is important to consider the issue of Kashmir as Pakistan's key ideological framework is surrounded by this issue whereas the region of GB has been politically marginalized, as the region is subsumed under the broader identity of Kashmir.

3.1 Pre-partition key historical events

All the main scholar agreed that through the Treaty of Amritsar 1846, the state of J&K was given to Gulab Singh (Raja of Jammu) by the British Crown. This formed the present-day narrative that GB is being part of the issue of Kashmir. However, Scholars such as Sökefeld is of the opinion that GB was never being a part of Jammu and Kashmir. Even in the treaty the areas mentioned were the land located east of the Indus River and west of the Ravi River. The area of Gilgit, Hunza, and Nager, which are located west and north of the Indus, were not included. Still the Maharaja of J&K continued to rule this region⁵¹. However, the Dogra's faced severe resistance from the locals and were unable to establish effective control the area of Gilgit. By the time of 1877, this region's significance increased, as it is a well-known fact that it was a time of the Great Game, by which Russia and British were competing. The British showed interest as some of the region of Gilgit alongside Afghanistan acted as a buffer zone against the Russian expansion in Central Asia. The troops of Russia started to move toward the Pamirs, to trade as British was maintaining monopoly over the global trade. Because of the fear of Russian expansion, British leased the Gilgit Wazarat

⁵⁰ Priyanka Singh, "Gilgit Baltistan Between Hope and Despair," *Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi*, 2013,14.

⁵¹ Martin Sökefeld, "Locating Gilgit-Baltistan," in *The Palgrave Handbook of New Directions in Kashmir Studies*, ed. Haley Duschinski · Mona Bhan Cabeiri deBergh Robinson (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2023), 60.

from the Maharaja of J&K for 60 years. This very treaty brought the region under the direct British control and very much separated itself from the rest of the princely state. However, in 1947, as British began to dismantle its colonies, British India cancelled the lease of the Gilgit subdivision, which had originally set to expire in 1995⁵². Another crucial aspect was that only the area of Gilgit Wazarat was included in the agreement between the British and the Dogra, which only make one-eighth of the whole Gilgit-Baltistan today. Nevertheless, control of the entire GB region was transferred to the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir. Ironically, all these decisions was a strategically driven move, creating long-term difficulties and challenges for the region's Indigenous people. Although this all violated the right of self-determination of the people. Later, Brigadier Ghansara Singh was appointed as the region's governor and assumed administrative authority. When Maharaj was deciding about the future of the region, many local agencies were going against J&K and India. There was a civil organization by the name of Tanzim e Sarfrashon, an organization wanted to be part of Pakistan. The main reason being the religious similarity. Moreover, the local paramilitary unit, the Gilgit Scouts, sought to be integrated with Pakistan. Ghansar Singh informed the Maharaj that he had been told that the Scout favored Pakistan and would only serve the Maharaja if they were formally incorporated into the Kashmir State Forces. However, he did not receive any response from the Maharaja. It is noteworthy that at the time, Two British officer Major William Brown and Captain Jock Mathieson were the main in charge of the scout. In his memoir, Brown offered a detailed account of the events of 1947. He noted that the that the rulers of Nagar and Hunza declined to enter a new treaty with the Maharaja due to concerns that Jammu and Kashmir might accede to India. By the mid-October 1947, the news of Kasmir acceding to India reached Gilgit. This rise tension and violence in the region. The Gilgit Council stage a coup and the revolt against Brigadier Singh, who had to surrender to local forces. In his book, Singh stated that he signed a document transferring the administrative control of the whole region to the Provincial Government of Gilgit⁵³. This raises the question: why was Gilgit still considered part of Kashmir when power had been transferred to Gilgit's provisional government?

⁵² Martin Sökefeld, "Locating Gilgit-Baltistan," in *The Palgrave Handbook of New Directions in Kashmir Studies*, ed. Haley Duschinski · Mona Bhan Cabeiri deBergh Robinson (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2023), 62.

⁵³ Syed Muhammad Abbas Mosvi, "Gilgit-Baltistan and the Ongoing Politics of Ambiguity," in *Society and Politics of Jammu and Kashmir*, ed. Hussain (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2021), 103.

In the event of revolt, the major role was played by Gilgit Scouts and the Muslim company of the J&K joining force operating under the leadership of late Col. Mirza Hassan Khan from Gilgit. Subsequently, Shah Rias Khan, a member of the Gilgit Raja family of Gilgit became president while Mirza Hassan Khan appointed as the Commander-in-Chief. The region declared its independence calling the state as “Islamic Jamahiriya Gilgit.” After getting independence for 15 days, Mirza Hassan called the authorities in Pakistan to integrate this region into Pakistan. So, the current ambiguous status of GB was not at all ambiguous at the time of accession⁵⁴. It was made such due to a bureaucratic mishandling specially during the time with the matter was discussed with the UN Security Council. On the other hand, the influence and power of the Gilgit Scout started to decrease. The power was shifted to the bureaucracy. Mohammed Alam Khan, who was a tahsildar at the time became the First Political Agent of Gilgit appointed by Pakistan. He rejected the provincial government form by the local and on top of it, became commandant of the troops. One could simply conclude that how the local actors were immediately left behind without having position in the authority structure. This somehow gave a hind of continuation of previous colonial practices and governance. On the other hand, Major Aslam, who was a State Force officer and was involved in the tribal invasion of Kashmir was appointed as a military commandant in Gilgit by General Tariq of the Azad Kashmir government. This led to military and administrative confusion. Later, the representative from the NWFP made it clear this region would be administered by Pakistan and not by Azad Kashmir. under the command of Major Aslam, the military campaign succeeded in driving the Dogra forces out from the key areas of Baltistan. There were also advancing to the areas of Dras, Kargil and the Zojila Pass. However, as Pakistani General Jilani replaced Major Aslam in the mid of 1948, is strategic errors caused significant territorial losses. By August 1948, the current areas of Gilgit-Baltistan were formed.

So historically there are contradictory perspective regarding GB is a part of Kashmir or not. There are many events as mentioned before showing that this region was historically not as such a part of the broader Kashmir issue. However, legally, and politically, the story is different as GB is still considered to be a part of Kashmir, as mentioned in the doctrine of international law and in the diplomatic stance of both India and Pakistan.

⁵⁴ Syed Muhammad Abbas Mosvi, “Gilgit–Baltistan and the Ongoing Politics of Ambiguity,” in *Society and Politics of Jammu and Kashmir*, ed. Hussain (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2021), 103.

3.2 Legal Status of Gilgit-Baltistan

As after the independence of the two states, i.e., India and Pakistan, both the states went into a war in 1948 to control the region of J&K. The dispute was subsequently taken to the United Nation by the Indian officials. Despite UN intervention, no solution is achieved till now. The UN resolutions established the legal basis under international law linking GB to the broader issue of J&K. The most significant legal framework to examine this issue lies in the United Nations resolution on Jammu and Kashmir. Under UN resolution 47 (1948) the entire princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, including GB should be decided through UN-supervised plebiscite⁵⁵. There is a requirement for both the states to withdraw their forces from the region to determine the political will of the people. Both the parties failed to do so. This position was again highlighted in UNSC Resolution 91 (1951), which stated that the future of this region is determined by free and impartial plebiscite under UN supervision, and any unilateral action would be rejected by the UN⁵⁶. Resolution 122 (1957) further states that India stance to integrate Kashmir into its constitution would not change the fact that it is still recognized as a disputed territory⁵⁷. These resolutions pointed out that the region's final decision would be determined through a democratic process under UN supervision. In international law, the region of GB is included in the conflict of Kashmir. on the other hand, there are section of people believing that the UN resolutions are being passed in respect to Jammu and Kashmir, and the region of GB is not specifically mentioned in any of the resolutions.

3.3 India's Position on Gilgit-Baltistan Status

Now, the Indian stance regarding the case of Gilgit-Baltistan is simple. Understanding events of history in their own convenience, they considered this region legally being part of India and called this region as "Pakistan Occupied Kashmir."⁵⁸ As evident in the Indian maps, this area is also being

⁵⁵ Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Resolution adopted by the United Nations Commission for India and Pakistan on 13 August 1948* Document No.1100, Para. 75, (MOFA, 1948).

⁵⁶ UN Security Council, *Security Council resolution 91 (1951) [The India-Pakistan Question]*, S/RES/91 (1951), 30 March 1951, <https://www.refworld.org/legal/resolution/unsc/1951/en/113004>. (accessed 06 April 2025)

⁵⁷ UN Security Council, *Security Council resolution 122 (1957) [The India-Pakistan Question]*, S/RES/122 (1957), 24 January 1957, <https://www.refworld.org/legal/resolution/unsc/1957/en/9059>. (accessed 06 April 2025)

⁵⁸ Kriti M Shah, "The Kashmir that India Lost: A Historical Analysis of India's Miscalculations on

Gilgit Baltistan," *Observer Research Foundation*, no. 334 (2021):3, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-kashmir-that-india-lost-a-historical-analysis-of-india-s-miscalculations-on-gilgit-baltistan>.

part of Jammu and Kashmir and viewed it as historically and legally being part of India Union. They hold the position that Pakistan illegally occupied it and as mentioned by Priyanka Singh in her book, that Pakistan attacked Jammu and Kashmir in 1947 and took the region of Gilgit-Baltistan. She also mentioned speeches of then India's defense minister, V K Krishna Menon, noting the areas of Northern region annexed in Pakistan without informing to UN.⁵⁹ So, in simple terms, India considered this region as a part of Kashmir and demanded the whole region of J&K including GB to be part of India as Maharaja declared the whole region to India. The Indians hold the opinion that Pakistan idea on Kashmir is based on territorial conquest rather than the will of people. And post-1947, this region has no political or legal status. They are not given provincial status and are also not part of Azad Kashmir. As Satinder Kumar Lambah termed it in his article as Pakistan rules this region and this rule is based on the story of deprivation.⁶⁰ Indians also hold the opinion that Pakistan is exfoliating resources of this region. By 1963, an agreement is signed between China and Pakistan called as China Pakistan Border Agreement of 1963, which according to Indian is an unlawfully attempt by Pakistan to cede the area to China⁶¹. This region which used to be a part of Hunza Valley.

In the political discourse of India, GB was rarely discussed from 1947 to the late 2010s. their scholars also termed the region as a "forgotten Kashmir." however after 2010, as China's infrastructure started in GB, India's media and intelligence experts mentioned the region. There was an article from 2013 in the Indian Defense Review, calling that the Indian government should use the local people of the region as proxies against China. By doing so, it would increase Indian influence in the region. As in 2013, BJP returned to power, there was a rise of nationalist discourse, by which India's stance regarding GB became more assertive. By 2016, Prime Minister Narendra Modi started to refer to the people of GB directly in his speech. Analysis suggested that the stance of Indian government shifted from a passive stance to one of assertive irredentism. Therefore, the government of BJP repeated claim the region of GB, both at a political and diplomatic level. In

⁵⁹ Priyanka Singh, *Gilgit Baltistan Between Hope and Despair* (Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses, New Delhi, 2013),14.

⁶⁰ Satinder Kumar Lambah, "The Tragic History of Gilgit-Baltistan since 1947," *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 11, no. 3, July (2016) :229, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45341958>.

⁶¹ Shubajit Roy, "Explained: The Pakistan-China relationship," *Indian Express*, February 10, 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-the-pakistan-china-relationship-7755770/>.

2022, the then Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh asserted that India's development trajectory in J&K and Ladakh would only consider to be completely achieved upon reaching GB. Amit Shah also made such statement calling to take Pakistan Occupied Kashmir back⁶².

Other main reason of the shift of paradigm regarding GB is because of the evolving strategic concern, as China is growing its footprint in the region. As CPEC passed through GB, it is seen as a consolidation of Pakistani and Chinese interests by India. The strategic importance of the region increased for India, moving beyond a bilateral territorial dispute with Pakistan to a more complex issue involving China. Repeatedly, Indian officials opposed the CPEC project. Recently in July 2025, Indian Parliament's Rajya Sabha, the Minister of State for External Affairs, Kirti Vardhan Singh said that India has consistently opposed and raised objections to the CPEC, viewing it as a key project under China's Belt and Road initiative.⁶³ The main objection is same as the project passed through GB which India's considered to be illegally occupied by Pakistan. In short, India maintained the stance that GB is an integral part of its territory which is illegitimately occupied by Pakistan and reject any unilateral attempt to alter its status.

3.4 Pakistan's Position on Gilgit-Baltistan Status

Like India, Pakistan also considered this region as a part of Kashmir dispute. Based on the idea of Muslim Majority region, Pakistan demand the whole Jammu and Kashmir. For that purpose, the region of GB is considered as a disputed area. If Pakistan merged GB in their country, it would jeopardize Pakistan stance on Kashmir Issue. On one hand, Pakistan would face severe protest from India and on the other hand lose the vote of the people of GB in case referendum held under UN supervision⁶⁴. So, despite the demand of the people of GB to be given the full provincial status, Pakistan failed to do so because it will undermine Kashmir's sovereignty from Indian rule. This

⁶² Muhammad Ahmad Khan, Saniya Khan, "India's Rhetoric on Gilgit Baltistan under the BJP," *South Asian Voices*, June 5, 2024, <https://southasianvoices.org/https-southasianvoices-org-geo-c-pk-n-indian-rhetoric-gilgit-baltistan-bjp-06-05-2024/>.

⁶³ "India 'consistently protested' inclusion of CPEC as Flagship project of China's OBOR: Govt tells Parliament," *The Economic Times*, Jul 24, 2025, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/india-consistently-protested-inclusion-of-cpec-as-flagship-project-of-chinas-obor-govt-tells-parliament/articleshow/122887046.cms?from=mdr>.

⁶⁴ Raja Qaiser Ahmed and Javaid Hayat, "Azad Jammu and Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan: Politics of Power Sharing and Status Quo," in *The Palgrave Handbook of New Directions in Kashmir Studies*, ed. Haley Duschinski · Mona Bhan Cabeiri DE Bergh Robinson (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2023), 79.

region would fully integrate in Pakistan with the final solution of Kashmir. the 1999 Al-Jehad Trust case decided by the Supreme Court of Pakistan is considered a milestone in defining the legal and constitutional position of GB. the Court recognized that people of the region hold Pakistani citizenship and should enjoy the same fundamental rights as all other citizens of the state. The Court ordered the federal government to make legislative and administrative measures within six months to ensure the rights to be protected⁶⁵. However, there was no constitutional integration of GB as fifth province. This created a lasting paradox; the people were declared Pakistani with full fundamental rights, but the region itself remained in a constitutional limbo.

However, on the other hand, throughout the post-independence period, the people of Gilgit-Baltistan always wanted to be fully integrated with Pakistan. They wanted adequate representation under the government of Pakistan. Despite being administer by Pakistan, the region lacks fundamentally constitutional and political rights and being rule by executive mechanism. This region has been excluded from Pakistan constitution. The lack of local people representation in political power has led to increased grievances among the locals.

3.5 Conclusion

In Conclusion, GB remained in a web of persistent and unresolved ambiguity, caught between its historical association with J&K dispute. Internationally, it is perpetuated by the diplomatic stance, with UN link it with the Kashmir issue. But many analysts pointed that there are many historical events demonstrating that the region of GB was not a part of J&K. And the UN resolution did not mentioned GB specifically. It is in the interest of both the rival state to integrate GB into J&K. For their own purpose, both the state fundamentally sustained this stance. India claimed this region and rejected Pakistan control over the region calling it Pakistan occupied territory. On the other hand, Pakistan refrained from granting full constitutional integration to avoid jeopardizing its position on the larger Kashmir dispute. As a result, GB exists in a strategic and constitutional gray zone, where the geopolitical claims neglected the political aspirations and rights of the local population.

⁶⁵ Livia Holden, "Law, Governance, and Culture in Gilgit-Baltistan: Introduction," *South Asian History and Culture* 10, no. 1 (January 2, 2019):6, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19472498.2019.1576300>.

Chapter 4 The Evolving Political Landscape and Key Movements in Gilgit-Baltistan

After the longstanding history and hard-won struggle for independence, the administrative journey of the region has been marked by the series of flawed policies that stunted the region's political and economic development. From its initial days, GB was administered through the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR). By this law, the whole GB was run by a political agent, who could be a bureaucrat or an army personal appointed by the state. The political agent had all the power related to administrative, political and judiciary domains. They adopted the imperial British model of centralized control. This somehow snatched GB's political identity and representation at national level. Formerly under the Kashmiri Dogra, GB had representation in state assembly. They used to have judiciary rights where people can appeal to the High Court, showing some degree of legal and political autonomy. However, after independence when Pakistan took control of the region, the introduction of the FCR significantly curtailed these liberties. FCR, which is a colonial law, was imposed on FATA⁶⁶. It denied the people the right to a fair trial, imposed collective punishment on entire tribes for an individual's crime, and centralized all judicial and executive powers in the political agent, who controlled every department. On the other hand, the people were living under the heavy burden of tax and forced labor. Moreover, the local rajas and mirs continued to engage in exploitative practices. The region, already facing these significant challenges, was further encumbered by the enforcement of the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR)⁶⁷. By FCR, locals were kept away from mainstream political decision, as in 1963, the whole territory of Hunza Tash Kurgan was given to China without informing the people and Mir of Hunza. The locals showed concern and called for abolishment of this regulation. In addition to this, in 1950 the federal

⁶⁶ Muneer Ahmed and Mudasar Iqbal, "The Imposition of FCR in Gilgit Baltistan and Its Impacts on the Region," *International Journal of Islamic Studies & Culture* 4, no: 3 (2024): 242, <http://ijisc.com.pk/index.php/IJISC/issue/view/199>.

⁶⁷ Martin Sökefeld, "From Colonialism to Postcolonial Colonialism: Changing Modes of Domination in the Northern Areas of Pakistan," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 64, no. 4 (2005): 943, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25075905>.

ministry of Kashmir Affairs and Northern Areas (KANA) was created, responsible for law making, development and administration. There was no representation of the political leaders of GB⁶⁸.

4.1 Gilgit League

As a result, the Gilgit League, a political party, was formed in 1956. The founder was Colonel Mirza Hasaan Khan. The Gilgit League is considered the first political movement specifically organized against FCR in Gilgit-Baltistan. It was formed to oppose the harsh administrative and judicial control imposed on the region, denying local political rights and governance. The Gilgit League's demands for the abolition of the FCR, and political reforms marked the beginning of organized resistance against this colonial-era law in Gilgit-Baltistan. The party was later banned in 1958 under martial law⁶⁹.

4.2 Tanzeem-e-Millat

Later in 1970s, Tanzeem-e-Millat, first nationalist organization, emerged, advocating against FCR and the lack of political rights. In 1971, an incident took place by which a principle and teachers were dismissed by the authorities. A protest started by this organization. The tension further escalated when a protester was killed by firing from the administration. There was a widespread demonstration for political reforms and rights. Advocate Johar Ali, a leader of the organization, was arrested, leading to the demonstrator attacking the local jail. Despite repression from authorities, the movement forced the government to bring significant political developments such as the abolition of the FCR and reforms toward local governance under Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Tanzeem-e-Millat played a key role in politicizing the masses of Gilgit-Baltistan and articulating demands for autonomy, rights, and the end of oppressive colonial-era laws like the FCR. Although Bhutto brought many positive changes in the political structure of GB⁷⁰. The FCR, along with the agency system and limited control of princes, was abolished and the region was transformed into districts like those in other areas of Pakistan. But the region was denied government structure created in AJK by the Interim Constitution of 1974. By this, AJK has its own president, PM, legislative assembly, supreme court, high court. Members of the AJK assembly are directly elected, and they choose the prime minister among themselves, as is typical in a

⁶⁸ Sohaib Bodla, "Making a Nation in High Mountains: Balawars and Balawaristan Nationalism in Ghizer District of Gilgit Baltistan," *Ethnoscripts* 16, no 1 (2015), <https://journals.sub.uni-hamburg.de/ethnoscripts/article/view/777>.

⁶⁹ Sajjad Ahmad, "Core-Periphery Relationship: The Post-1973 State of Pakistan and Nationalism in Gilgit-Baltistan," *Pakistan Perspectives* 20, no.2, July-December 2015, 107.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

parliamentary democracy. While Pakistan managed different sectors such as defense, foreign policy, and through the AJK Council and KANA, the AJK government retains autonomy over many internal affairs. In contrast to this, KANA stayed in complete control of GB's government. In addition to this, State Subject Rule was abolished in GB. The State Subject Rule was a rule to protect the status of Indigenous people by allowing only natives, also known as State Subjects, to acquire permanent residence in the State. Under this rule, the natural resources belonged to local people, who had the exclusive right to use them without external interference. After 1947, Gilgit Baltistan's status reflected the former special status of Jammu & Kashmir, as it was also governed by the State Subject Rule under the Maharaja of Kashmir. However, in 1974, Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto abolished the SSR, which led to significant immigration from Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa into Gilgit Baltistan⁷¹. This influx altered the region's demographic and sectarian composition, intensifying existing sectarian tensions, especially since the government was perceived to tacitly support these changes. For instance, the Sunni population in districts like Diamer more than doubled between 1998 and 2011.

4.3 Karakoram National Movement

In 1984, another nationalist movement emerged by the name of Karakoram National Movement (KNM). It was founded by student activists based in Karachi. This group, unlike the other one, has a well-structured organization and clear manifesto. Their main assertion was that GB had been historically and culturally distinct from Kashmir. This group rejected all kinds of agreement, including the Amritsar and Karachi treaties, calling them a tool to continue colonial legacy. When they started this movement, their main focus was to challenge Kashmiri leadership who relied on colonial documents to subordinate GB's identity to that of Kashmir. They started a strong campaign against Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), seeing it as an obstacle to GB's separate identity⁷². They believed that AJK's leadership kept the status of GB unresolved. Additionally, they called for reopening of historical roots of Kargil, Dras, Ladakh in India and the Wakhan corridor to reconnect divided communities separated by arbitrary borders. The leaders of this movement

⁷¹ Senge H. Sering, "Constitutional Impasse in Gilgit-Baltistan (Jammu and Kashmir): The Fallout," *Strategic Analysis* 34, no. 3 (May 17, 2010): 354–58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161003658998>.

⁷² Abrar Hussain et al., "Before Grievances Turn into Ethno-Political Violence: The Case of Gilgit-Baltistan Politics," *Development and Communication* 07, no. 02 (2023): 21, <https://doi.org/10.36968/JPDC-V07-I02-02>.

also advocated against the abolishment of state subject rules. They called for re-installment of state subject rules. As stated by Taaruf Abbas in 2014, Central General Secretary of Karakoram National Movement that abolishment of SSR has enabled illegal settlement of Pakistani nationals in GB leading to demographic changes. This is a clear violation of UN resolution. This very much threatens the region's culture tradition and deprives local acquiring jobs and business opportunities.

4.4 Balawaristan National Front (BNF)

In 1988, a major development started when nationalist movement emerged by the name of Balawaristan National Front (BNF), founded by Nawaz Khan Naji. It marked a significant evolution in GB's politics and held a special position in nationalist discourse. It was the first time a nationalist leader advocated an independent state called Balawaristan⁷³. This state would to be include GB, the districts of Kohistan and Chitral from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Indian-controlled Ladakh. The main objective was to create unity in diversity. The word "Balawaristan" was derived from a Persian word *bala* meaning high, and "Balawar" was coined by Naji to give the idea of unified national identity based on shared geography, history, and culture. Before BNF, regional parties called for constitutional and democratic rights within Pakistan but did not challenge its sovereignty or demand independence. BNF challenged Pakistan's official position, which aligns GB with Jammu and Kashmir in the Kashmir dispute, arguing instead that GB was never legitimately part of Jammu and Kashmir but controlled militarily. Naji calls for a peaceful struggle and UN-supervised plebiscite to enable GB's people to determine their future, aiming also to be recognized as a fourth party in the Kashmir dispute alongside India, Pakistan, and Kashmir. In one of the early pamphlets by the BNF party, it was mentioned that historically the ruler of Jammu and Kashmir gave GB provincial status at that time. He called that State Subject Rule was to protect the rights of the local Indigenous community. Even today (at that time) this rule is practiced in Jammu and Kashmir, but Pakistan rules breach the State Subject Rule and changed our paradise into the colony of Pathan. It was in 1992 when BNF first time openly demanded for independence as seeking democratic rights had negligible impact on the government of Pakistan. The same year

⁷³ Martin Sökefeld, "Balawaristan and Other ImagiNations: A Nationalist Discourse in the Northern Areas of Pakistan," *Academia*, November 19, 2016, https://www.academia.edu/29954393/Balawaristan_and_other_ImagiNations_A_Nationalist_Discourse_in_the_Northern_Areas_of_Pakistan.

they called for the boycott of the ‘jeshn-e azadi’ held annually on November 1 to commemorate the 1947 revolt. Later in April 1993, “Gilgit Baltistan National Conference” was held, bringing twelve political group and demanded for self-determination for GB (at that time it was Northern Areas). At the conference they formed the ‘United Front of the Northern Areas’ (Northern Areas Mutahida Mahaz, NAMM). For the first time in the region’s history, this alliance unit both the Shia and the Sunni groups. On November 1, 1993, NAMM held a large protest to bring substantial reforms and gave a newly elected Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto’s government an ultimatum or face wide protests. When the government failed to bring reforms, the coalition organized a major demonstration in Gilgit, but authorities preemptively blocked it with police and paramilitary forces. Protests by BNF members were frequently suppressed, and activists were sometimes imprisoned, including in August 1995 for distributing independence-demanding posters. In 1994 Northern Areas Council election was held in which BNF and other nationalist parties were pressured to withdraw from the election by other major Pakistani parties like Pakistan People’s Party. It resulted in no electoral wins for the nationalists. On the other hand, BNF gained international support to participate in a 1994 London conference organized by the Kashmir International Front. However, their visas were denied. In 1996, numerous Northern Areas parties submitted a memorandum to the UN Secretary-General, demanding implementation of the 1948 UN resolution calling for local self-government in GB pending Kashmir’s final resolution. They were invited to a 1996 UN Human Rights sub-commission conference held in Geneva, but the BNF representative failed to get travel visas. These actions showed the BNF’s progression from local political agitation to regional alliances and international activism, emphasizing demands for self-determination, unity across sectarian lines, and resistance to Pakistani state control through political protests, electoral participation, and appeals to global forums⁷⁴.

Later, the party gained popularity in Ghizer district and was divided into two main factions. The Naji group of BNF called for peaceful negotiation and has its strong position in Punial and Gupis subdistricts. While the other faction led by Abdul Hamid Khan is in exile and is mostly seen as a pro-Indian having support in Yasin valley. Naji is being seen as an honest leader and won the elections of 2011, 2015 and 2020. Previously, nationalist leader used to boycott election but the

⁷⁴ Martin Sökefeld, “Balawaristan and Other Imaginations: A Nationalist Discourse in the Northern Areas of Pakistan,” *Academia*, November 19, 2016, https://www.academia.edu/29954393/Balawaristan_and_other_ImagiNations_A_Nationalist_Discourse_in_the_Northern_Areas_of_Pakistan.

victory of Naji lead a way for the nationalist leader to reach the masses. It was not an easy winning from Ghizer as for many years the district was under the influenced of Pir Karam Ali Shah, a pir of an Ismaili community, who had a long association with the PPP⁷⁵. The movement framed the Balawar identity as a secular political identity rooted in shared history and geography rather than separatism or anti-Pakistan sentiment. Naji has expressed the deep grievances at the heart of the BNF struggle, highlighting the legal and identity crisis faced by GB residents who lack constitutional recognition and rights within Pakistan. He remarked that where do the people of GB fall in the constitution of Pakistan? Nowhere! They are not a legal citizen and have no recognition in Pakistan nor could file a petition before the Supreme Court of Pakistan. Overall, the BNF's rise marks a transition from demands for provincial rights to a nationalist agenda centered on sovereignty and self-determination based on a unique Balawaristani identity. This kind of movement highlighted how identity politics fuel a demand for political autonomy based on the idea of perceived distinctiveness and historically rooted identity claims. This kind of movement aimed to protect their unique cultural, social, and political dynamic against perceived domination by other groups or state.

On the other hand, the faction led by Abdul Hamid Khan was brewing anti-Pakistan sentiments in GB. He left Pakistan in 1999 for Nepal where Indian intelligence agency RAW operative Colonel Arjun and Joshi guided him. Later he moved to India and settled in New Delhi, living luxuries life with his family. Report suggested that he was heavily funded, provided him Indian documents and business facilities. In 2007, he was relocated to Brussels to speak at international forums and campaign against Pakistan. The Indian spy agency is reported to have allocated around one billion Indian Rupees to support BNF-H's separatist activities in Gilgit-Baltistan. Intelligence reports suggested that later he was relocated to Brussel to campaign on international platforms. He started to participate in conferences, interacted with global media, and utilized social media to malign Pakistan⁷⁶. His major agenda was to send letter to international financial institutions not to fund for Pakistan's proposed construction of six dams in Gilgit-Baltistan and in areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Kohistan and Chitral districts, which the BNF-H claims as historically part of

⁷⁵ Sohaib Bodla, "Making a Nation in High Mountains: Balawars and Balawaristan Nationalism in Ghizer District of Gilgit Baltistan," *Ethnoscripts* 16, no. 1 (2015), <https://journals.sub.uni-hamburg.de/ethnoscripts/article/view/777>.

⁷⁶ "GB leader abandons anti-state activities," *Dawn News*, September 12, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1579253>.

Gilgit-Baltistan. During an interview he said that Pakistan as conspiring against the people for seven decades and denying them basic rights and recognition. The reports by Pakistan's intelligence suggested that BNF-H received INR 1 billion for their activities in GB. Sher Nadir Shahi, who was the chairperson of the Balawaristan National Student Organization (BNSO), the student wing of the Balawaristan National Front Hameed group (BNF-H), was involved in activities sponsored by RAW in Rawalpindi and Ghizer. He was publishing a magazine by the name of "Balawaristan Times," which was used to spread propaganda, especially in the youth. He played a significant role in recruiting students across Pakistan to support the BNF-H agenda. The BNF-H chapter in GB was dismantled in an Intelligence Based Operation (IBO) conducted by Pakistani security forces in May 2019. During IBO, fourteen activists of the BNF-H were arrested. In addition, the forces also seize large numbers of weapons and ammunition. All these activities were funded by RAW. They also sponsored enormous number of students across Pakistan to spread its separatist agenda. BNF-H was accused of brainwashing youth through secessionist propaganda and carrying out terrorist activities. The crackdown severely disrupted the group's network and operations in the area. In February 2019, Abdul Hamid Khan surrendered, ending his exile. Pakistan banned BNF-H under the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA). Hamid apologized for his past activities and claimed the money he received was used to support students financially. Since then, he remained in Pakistan, ending his separatist activities. The BNF-H faction is distinct from the Nawaz Khan Naji-led BNF group, with differing strategies; while Naji's group advocates peaceful negotiations with Pakistan and India, BNF-H was known for more radical separatist efforts linked to external support aimed to destabilize the region. These illustrate the contrasting approaches within the Balawaristan nationalist movement, a peaceful democratic activism under Naji's leadership versus more radical, externally supported separatism under Abdul Hamid Khan⁷⁷. The case of Abdul Hamid demonstrated that at times nationalist tendencies can be influenced by funding of foreign actors, posing potential risks to internal stability. This showed the importance of paying greater political, economic and development attention to the region to address local grievances and prevent external exploitation of internal distant. And the shift of the BNF-Naji group showed inclusion and representation and moderate separatist tendencies.

⁷⁷ Abdul Rahman Bukhari, "BNF's leaders Abdul Hameed Khan renounces his separatist ideology, returns to Gilgit," *Pamir Times*, September 10, 2020, <https://pamirtimes.net/2020/09/10/bnfs-leader-abdul-hameed-khan-renounces-his-separatist-ideology-returns-to-gilgit/#:~:text=With%20reporting%20by%20Abdul%20Rahman,state%20activities%20in%20the%20past.>

Considering the nationalist discourse of Gilgit-Baltistan, it is somehow different from its surrounding nations like Pakistan and Kashmir. This nationalism is not yet institutionalized politically and the movements in the region are struggled to achieve political goals of empowerment and autonomy. These movements are not just based on the notion of shared culture but common experienced of political exclusion from the mainstream politics of Pakistan, despite the region's proud history of struggle for freedom. The nationalist in the region being skeptical about the policies and governance of federal government, only legitimized the local struggle for self-determination.

4.5 Action Committee (AAC) in Gilgit-Baltistan: Formation, Mobilization and Political Impact

In recent times, the major demonstrations in GB have been led by Awami Action Committee (AAC), which currently emerged as the most influential grassroots platform, calling on the issues of rights, resources, and political autonomy. The AAC in GB was formed around the years 2013-2014 as a coalition of about 20-22 nationalist, social and religious group under the leadership of Ehsan Ali. The reason to form this coalition was driven by a deep-seated and long-standing frustration over a range of socio-economic and political issues and in response to widespread public dissatisfaction with the federal government's policies, mainly the withdrawal of government subsidies, notably wheat flour, imposition of taxes, which is seen as illegal under the region's disputed status. The movement quickly gained popularity and the AAC became a representative of public demands, particularly the reinstatement of subsidies and the abolition of illegal taxation on locals, invoking international law principles due to the disputed status of the region and greater legislative powers for the GB Assembly.

4.5.1 Leadership and Key Figures in the AAC

The AAC's leadership in GB is diverse, including lawyers, activists, and political organizers. The influential figures included.

4.5.1.1 Ehsan Ali

The most prominent leader is Ehsan Ali, a Marxist lawyer and member of Inqalabi Communist Party, who has been the convener and public face of the AAC since its inception. He has unified diverse sectarian and ethnic groups including Shia and Sunni communities into one platform and challenges the established political parties like PPP, PML(N) and PTI in the region. He advocated for social justice, economic rights, and democratic representation in GB, helping in mobilizations such as the 2014 pro-subsidy and opposition to the recent land reforms and mineral bills. Despite

being arrested and placed on the Fourth Schedule for alleged ties to terrorism by state, he continues to inspire ACC activist and youth at the grassroots level. He had to face charges of blasphemy, but the local scholars refused to back the charge. He faced more than 16 FIR and six chargers and arrested numerous times where he was tortured in custody. Still, he remained on the frontlines of AAC ⁷⁸. As he said, “My seventy years have passed; whatever life remains is dedicated to the liberation, progress, and prosperity of the working class and the oppressed people of this land.”⁷⁹

4.5.1.2 Baba Jan

A well-known left wing political leader and human right activist is currently playing significant role within ACC. His activism played important role in the socio-political landscape of the GB. He advocated for the rights of displaced communities affected by environmental disaster and land reforms and the government suppression.

In 2010, after the devastating landsliding at Attabad, leading to displaced over one thousand people, Baba Jan started a protest the government. The main demand was for compensation and rehabilitation of the affected families. His struggle during the time was characterized by peaceful protest and mobilization of the locals, which earned him widespread support from the people. His critical approach towards state policies in GB soon brought him into conflict with the authorities. In August 2011, following the killing of protestors, he was arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment under anti-terrorism law. During the time of imprisonment, he was tortured, denial heath care and health deterioration, something which is being widely condemned by human rights organization. In 2012, during a private interview in jail, he said that it is no longer a matter of ignorance; it is a conscious denial of the rights of commoner. And this cruelty needs to be shattered.⁸⁰ At the time Ehsan Ali was his lawyer and he gained support from many international intellectuals and activists, including a petition signed by Noam Chomsky, Tariq Ali and many

⁷⁸ Adam Pal, “Gilgit Baltistan: Oppression by Pakistani State Continues as Bail of Awami Action Committee Leaders Rejected,” *Revolutionary Communist Of America*, July 10, 2025, <https://communistusa.org/gilgit-baltistan-oppression-by-pakistani-state-continues-as-bail-of-awaami-action-committee-leaders-rejected/>.

⁷⁹ Progressive Gilgit Baltistan, “My seventy years have passed; whatever life remains is dedicated to the liberation, progress, and prosperity of the working class and the oppressed people of this land, August 10, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DNKEqqjIw4U/?igsh=dDh1a2Y5dDZscWtz>.

⁸⁰ Kiran Nazish, “Baba Jan: Imprisoned, an activist speaks,” *The Express Tribune*, August 29, 2012, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/427817/baba-jan-imprisoned-an-activist-speaks>.

more. This showed the political nature of his detention. After the decade struggle and international pressure, Baba Jan was released on November 27, 2020.⁸¹ He is now a president of the Awami Worker Party. His release marked significant victory for grassroots activism in Gilgit-Baltistan and underscored the persistent resistance against repression.

Baba Jan role in AAC helped the committee to have left wing grassroots approach in contrast to a more leader-oriented establishment. His voice remained central in calls for democratic rights and socioeconomic reforms for Gilgit-Baltistan's marginalized populations.

4.6 Major Protests and Major Campaign

Gandum Subsidy Tehreek (The wheat subsidy movement) of 2014, led by the Awami Action Committee (AAC), was one of the major uprisings against the government. This all happened when the government removed wheat subsidies. As GB has a disputed status, this means that GB should be given a special treatment comparing to other four province. According to UNCIP, this area is entitled to have subsidies on fifty subjects. That is why wheat subsidies in GB were introduced by former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1970s due extreme poverty index, little industry, making it difficult for locals to afford staple food items. This subsidy was introduced lifetime for the local population, however, in starting in 2011, government began incrementally withdrawing it under the policies of international financial bodies like the IMF. This triggered widespread protest, including the one led by AAC. There was a drastic increase in prices, from Rs820 in 2009 for wheat flour bags to Rs 1400 by 2014, sparking widespread hardship across diverse communities in the region. Ehsan Ali said that their demand is not just about subsidy but on the issues that could not be solved in many decades⁸² The movement united people across different ethnic, sectarian and gender showing solidarity. Hundreds of thousands of people protested, sit-ins, and blockades, including on the Karakoram Highway⁸³.

⁸¹ Mavra Bari, "Pakistan: Climate activists pay a high price," *DW*, February 15, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/pakistan-climate-activists-pay-a-high-price/a-64708527>.

⁸² Uzay Bulut, "Pakistan's Discrimination Against Gilgit-Baltistan Invokes Mass Protests," *Modern Diplomacy*, February 8, 2024, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2024/02/08/pakistans-discrimination-against-gilgit-baltistan-invokes-mass-protests/>.

⁸³ Qalandar Bux Memon, "ESHAN ALI AND THE GILGIT-BALTISTAN WHEAT MOVEMENT," *Naked Punch*, accessed September 24, 2025, <https://nakedpunch.com/eshan-ali-and-the-gilgit-baltistan-wheat-movement/>.

This protest was quite a wind of change because it challenged both economic injustice and political marginalization of Gilgit-Baltistan. On 10 March 2014, Ehsan called for a protest and shutter down strike. It was quite a success leading to commercial life halted in seven districts of GB. The government response by imposing section 144 CrPC which is a law form during colonial era. By this law, there is a ban on public gatherings. The AAC stood firm and declared a start of indefinite protest from April 15, 2014. Ehsan Ali challenged the Section 144 and get court permission to protest at four designated locations. Tens of thousands participated in the sit-ins, setting up camps and committing to strike until their demands were fulfilled.

Despite the pressure from the government through negotiation and arrests, the resilience of the AAC ensured the restoration of the subsidy and introduced new political awareness. This movement marked a foundational moment for subsequent activism by the AAC, on issues of food security to a broader struggle for autonomy and justice in Gilgit-Baltistan. In summary, this movement was not just about economics but became a symbol of political awakening and unity, fueled by the leadership of AAC activists who connected bread-and-butter issues to demands for dignity and self-determination.

4.7 Expansion of the Political Agenda

During the period of 2016-18, the Awami Action Committee (AAC) expanded its political agenda including the issue of taxation, political representation, and constitutional rights. Protest started when taxes were imposed in GB by the Gilgit-Baltistan Council, a body controlled by the federal government of Pakistan. From 15 members of the council, nine are nominated by Pak government, and the rest of the six are also under the influence of the federal government⁸⁴. The taxation was widely rejected as the region's constitutional status is unsettled and taxes should not be imposed by a non-representative, Islamabad-controlled authority. For the large-scale protest, AAC joined hands with Anjuman-e Tajiran, local traders. This led to shutter strikes and long march from Skardu to Gilgit even in a harsh winter condition. Slogans were raised like "Tax lo Huquq do" (Pay taxes, get rights) and "No taxation without representation" symbolized the movement, demanding constitutional recognition and political representation for Gilgit-Baltistan⁸⁵.

⁸⁴ Afzal Ali Shigri, "Taxation without representation," *The Express Tribune*, January 2, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1380271>.

⁸⁵ Sana Jamal, "Gilgit-Baltistan protests called-off after two weeks," *Gulf News*, November 5, 2018, <https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/pakistan/gilgit-baltistan-protests-called-off-after-two-weeks-1.2152312>,

In 2018, protests further intensified when the new Gilgit-Baltistan Order was introduced. This order has many problematic clauses. One of the key issues was, it was formulated without the consent of the locals, and the clauses were more state centric. Firstly, it defined citizen of GB as anyone having domicile of GB and who is citizen of Pakistan. This means anyone can claim the citizenship in the region, not just the Indigenous people of GB. Given the disputed status of the region, allowing others to claimed citizenship would undermine the unique political and legal situation and threaten the identity of the locals. This challenged the rights of the locals and alter the demography of the region. This order also gives extensive power to the Prime Minister of Pakistan. The PM has the authority to make laws and decisions overriding by law passed by the provincial assembly. This somehow sidelines the local Legislative Assembly. The PM has the authority to assigned non-locals to different post in GB. Bureaucrats have more power than the local elected members. This reduced the power of local authority, and the role gets limited to mere formality, raising concerns about the regions' political autonomy. The order also curtailed the fundamental rights to the citizen. It allowed detention without trial up to three months⁸⁶. And gives state to have control of property under the vague claims of public interest. While compensation be given, but the government would decide the amount of compensation without any judicial supervising. This gave state excessive power over the property.

Against the 2018 Order, there was a widespread protest all over the region as it failed to grant the people constitutional rights and genuine autonomy. All the opposition parties, civil society, activists including Awami Action Committee united in opposition, organizing rallies against the federal government. The opposition members termed this order as “anti-people.” The protestor said that this is nothing but a sham and a farce.⁸⁷ The opposition leader of the time, Muhammad Shafi Khan said that if the people of FATA could be declared a part of Pakistan, why couldn't those of GB be granted a constitutional status.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Yasir Abbas, “Governance of Gilgit Baltistan: Issues and Solutions,” *RSIL*, October 27, 2022, <https://rsilpak.org/2022/governance-of-gilgit-baltistan-issues-and-solutions/>.

⁸⁷ NNI, “GB Order 2018: Opposition boycotts PM’s speech,” *The News*, May 28, 2018, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/322261-gb-order-2018-opposition-boycotts-pm-s-speech>.

⁸⁸ Jamil Nagri, “Protests held across GB against new order,” *Dawn News*, May 26, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1410103>.

This led to a violent clash between police and protesters, with tear gas used to disperse crowds and several activists injured. Opposition leaders boycotted official events when the then Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi was to visit Gilgit City and tore copies of the order to show their disapproval of the order. As the coalition of parties like the Awami Action Committee emphasized that governance through such orders was unacceptable and that constitutional rights must be granted to the people of GB, akin to the status given to other regions like Azad Jammu and Kashmir⁸⁹.

These protests had been significant, but the outcomes were mixed. This protest forced the government to take the region's grievances on the issues of political exclusion, lack of constitutional rights, and federal overreach seriously. For a brief period, the protest compelled the Gilgit-Baltistan Supreme Appellate Court to temporarily suspend the 2018 Order, restoring the previous 2009 Empowerment and Self-Governance Order. However, the federal government challenged this decision, and the Supreme Court of Pakistan later reinstated the 2018 Order⁹⁰.

Despite the enforcement of the order, the protests successfully helped to raise the demands of the locals for full constitutional recognition, political representation in Pakistan's parliament, and local autonomy. Although the 2018 Order remains intact, this marked a critical moment of political awakening and activism, demonstrating the widespread popular demand for rights and recognition which continues to influence Gilgit-Baltistan's governance discourse.

4.8 Recent Protests and Movements

In Gilgit-Baltistan, land ownership was governed through the "Khalisa Sarkar." This law was a colonial era land ownership system originated during the Sikh rule in the region, lasting from 1799 to 1849. By this law, large section of lands was classified as "Khalisa Sarkar" which means that these lands were treated as government property rather than the property of local communities.

⁸⁹ Jamil Nagri, "Protests held across GB against new order," *Dawn News*, May 26, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1410103>

⁹⁰ Haseeb Bhatti, "SC restores GB Order 2018, tells govt to ensure equal rights for region's people," *Dawn News*, August 8, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1425749>.

After independence, this law continued to exist in GB, effectively depriving Indigenous people of their traditional rights and ownership claims to ancestral lands⁹¹.

4.8.1 Gilgit-Baltistan Land Reform Act 2025

Recently, on May 21, 2025, the Gilgit-Baltistan Assembly passed a bill by the name of Gilgit-Baltistan Land Reforms Act 2025. This was seen as a landmark by the ruling party aimed at replacing the colonial-era Khalisa Sardar. By this act, the land was divided into two categories; Common land including forests, pastures, rivers considered community property, and Government Land owned or allotted to government institutions. The law formally first-time recognized locals as owners of common lands. It was a major shift toward empowering Indigenous communities. However, there are many loopholes in this reform. To overlook land distribution, District Land Appropriation Boards was established including the deputy commissioner and local assemble representatives. Major recommendation on land distribution was to be made by this board, which later will be finalized by the Gilgit-Baltistan Land Appropriation Board. The ruling party viewed the law as historic, giving locals ownership rights previously denied under outdated laws. According to Advocate Amjad Hussain, president of PPP in GB and member of GB assembly, it is the first time the colonial laws had been replaced with local laws. He said that trough this land reform, the region’s people have been declared owners of all common lands.⁹²”

However, the Act is quite controversial. The opposition rejected it, stated that it centralized power among bureaucrats rather than genuinely empowering communities. Critics raised concerns regarding vague definitions of common land, potential conflicts between customary laws and formal legal frameworks, and risks of elite capture and community displacement. According to reports, days before the adoption of Land Reform, an FIR was registered against sixteen members of AAC including the Chairperson Ehsan Ali. As they were planning for a Grand Jirga addressing the issues of natural resources ownership in the region. According to them, the government of Pakistan tried to increase direct foreign investment by mining and exploitation of resources in GB. The leaders of this coalition accused the government of facilitating looting of the resources. This

⁹¹ “Hundreds of Years-Old ‘Khalsa Sarkar’ Law: A Barrier to Land Rights in Gilgit-Baltistan,” *The Azadi Times*, November 12, 2024, <https://azaditimes.com/articles/hundreds-of-years-old-khalsa-sarkar-law-a-barrier-to-land-rights-in-gilgit-baltistan/>.

⁹² Jamil Nagri, “GB Land Reforms Act hailed as historic step towards local ownership,” *Dawn News*, May 26, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1913358>.

will be deprived the locals' rights over their own resources. However, they were arrested under anti-terrorism laws, they were accused of anti-state activities and hate speeches⁹³.

After the arrest of the leaders of AAC, there was a widespread protest across GB in the cities like Gilgit, Hunza, Skardu, and Nagar. The Awami Workers Party (AWP) being a part of AAC condemned the arrest of the leaders. They made a statement calling the arrest a campaign of harassment against the peaceful protest in GB⁹⁴. The protestors also blocked the Karakoram Highway. They held rallies demanding the immediate release of the detained leaders. Demonstrators condemned the government for using anti-terrorism law. They claimed the immediate release of the leaders. They accused the GB government is targeting political dissent under false pretenses. Protest also started outside the region, including in Karachi where students supporting AAC were arrested⁹⁵.

After three months of protests across multiples countries, with the support of activists and organizations, Ehsan Ali and the other activists were released on bail in early September 2025⁹⁶. Despite facing health related issues faced during his imprisonment, he remained steadfast in promoting for the rights and autonomy to the people of Gilgit-Baltistan. His release on bail was viewed as a significant moment for the protest movement, although the struggle for full political recognition and resource control continues.

4.9 The Role of AAC in Sost Trade Protest

In the recent times, GB traders' association particularly in Sost, started a protest, blocking the Karakoram Highway for over 40 days. The protest was led by the Anjuman Tajiran of GB. The protest involved sit-ins and shutter-down strikes in different areas of the region including Hunza, Nagar, Ghanche, Gilgit, and Skardu. This effect the trade activities between China and Pakistan. The reason for this was because of the grievances against the policy of taxation implanted by the federal government. The Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) collecting sales tax, advance income

⁹³ "Protests in Gilgit-Baltistan after arrest of ACC leaders," *Dawn News*, May 16, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1911304>.

⁹⁴ Abdul Rehman, "Protests in Pakistan's Gilgit-Baltistan demand the release of detained rights activists," *Peoples Dispatch*, May 19, 2025, <https://peoplesdispatch.org/2025/05/19/protests-in-pakistans-gilgit-baltistan-demand-the-release-of-detained-rights-activists/>.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ "Gilgit-Baltistan political prisoners released: a victory for international solidarity," *Marxism*, August 14, 2025, <https://marxist.com/gilgit-baltistan-political-prisoners-released-victory-for-international-solidarity.htm>.

tax, and federal excise duty on the imports coming via the Karakoram Highway and the Silk Route Dry Port in Sost. The traders and local communities objected these charges as the goods imported through this port are destined for the locals. Despite GB lack representation in federal tax laws, the federal government applied these taxes. This means anything goods brought for consumption within Gilgit-Baltistan were taxed similarly to goods destined for the rest of Pakistan, increasing costs and creating a heavy tax burden on local traders and consumers. The protestors were chanting, no taxation without representation.⁹⁷” The traders demanded that GB should be declared a non-tariff area especially on the good imported through the Sost Dry Port. The demonstrators also pointed out the mounting losses due to delayed clearance of over two hundred consignments stuck at the port, many of which were damaged by rains, causing billions in losses to local traders. The protestors allowed passenger to pass through the Khunjerab Pass, but blocked all business transportation, emphasizing their stand against economic exploitation without representation. Addressing at a press conference leaders of Pak-China Tajir Etihad Action Committee said,” the peaceful protest movement of traders would continue till the acceptance of their demands. They said that economic exploitation of the GB people would not be accepted.⁹⁸”

In these protests and demonstrations, the Awami Action Committee played a significant role. The AAC strongly supported the traders’ protest. On August 27, 2025, a caravan led by Ehsan Ali reach Sost to show solidarity with the protesting traders. The AAC amplified the traders’ demands and linked these economic grievances to broader political and regional rights. Ehsan Ali warned that if the demands were not met, the movement could escalate into a long march and more widespread protests⁹⁹. He said that “Tax-Free Zone is a national issue and warned that any weak deal would be treason against the people¹⁰⁰.”

⁹⁷ Ishtiaq Ahmad, “Gilgit-Baltistan’s Tax Protests: A Crisis Of Trade, Trust, And Representation,” *Friday Times*, September 20, 2025, <https://www.thefridaytimes.com/20-Sep-2025/gilgit-baltistan-s-tax-protests-crisis-trade-trust-representation>.

⁹⁸ Jamil Nagri, “Strike observed in GB to back traders’ protest in Sost,” *Dawn News*, August 30, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1938327>.

⁹⁹ “Silencing Gilgit-Baltistan: The federal crackdown on dissent – Highlighted at the 60th UNHRC,” *European Time*, September 12, 2025, <https://europeantimes.org/silencing-gilgit-baltistan-the-federal-crackdown-on-dissent-highlighted-at-the-60th-unhrc/>.

¹⁰⁰ Progressive Gilgit Baltistan, “Gilgit: Awami Action Committee Announces Participation in Sost Sit-in on August 27” Instagram photo, August 26,2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DNyi_fmWK0I/?img_index=1&igsh=MWM4bGE5eXFwbG9zaA%3D%3D.

4.10 Conclusion

In conclusion, the Awami Action Committee (AAC) played a vital role in GB's struggle for political recognition, regional autonomy, and economic justice. The struggle by the Committee points out the challenges of integrating a historically peripheral and geopolitically sensitive region into a federal system that fully respects its unique identity and aspirations. Since the formation of the coalition, AAC has been successful in mobilizing mass movements uniting people belonging to diverse communities. Through peaceful and sustained protest, AAC unmasked unfair policies by the federal government. Despite facing arrests and repression by state, AAC activists kept the movement alive. The movement helped in winning significant concession and raising awareness of regional grievances. Further, they have played a significant role in maintaining regional political consciousness and inspiring a new generation of leadership committed to social justice and democratic rights in Gilgit-Baltistan. AAC's importance is as a symbol and vehicle of local resistance and political aspiration in a historically marginalized region.

Chapter 5 Development, Resource Politics and Local Response in Gilgit-Baltistan

Over the past decade, the strategic importance of Gilgit-Baltistan increased within the context of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). This region acted as a gateway to a multi-billion-dollar projects with the key venture including the expansion of Karakoram Highway. In the year of 2024-25, the federal government announced the plan to invite Chinese companies to invest in large scale mining across the northern region of Pakistan. This further the extend the project of CPEC to resource sector. This increased local nationalist leaders concern over land rights, environmental damage, and external exploitation. While the state viewed these initiative progressive and regional integration, many local leaders are of the opinion that these ventures exclude people from GB from decision making and equitable benefits. The civil society activist groups, nationalist leaders, and movements led by AAC increasingly called these projects as manifestations of economic exploitation without giving the region proper constitutional framework. This chapter examines how these projects further intensified the grievances and sense of marginalization, turning initial hopes for inclusion into stronger demands for political autonomy and greater control over GB's natural and economic resources.

5.1 China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Gilgit-Baltistan: Corridor, Contestation and Local Perception of Threat

As a part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) announced in 2015, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is seen as a transformative infrastructure project. Through the aimed of connectivity, it links China's western province Xinjiang with Pakistan' Gwadar Port by the networks of roads, energy project, and special economic zones (SEZs). In the project, GB is strategically important, as through the Karakoram Highway, the region is overland connected to Xinjiang. Historically being a part of the Ancient Silk Road, GB now faced rapid infrastructure development through CPEC including road upgrades, power projects, and increased trade flow. However, with these potential economic benefits, the corridor has sparked significant grievances among the local population and nationalist leaders regarding many policies and outcomes. These leaders sometimes viewed CPEC as a potential threat describing it zero-sum game benefiting

external investors and state¹⁰¹. Some of the nationalist and local leader being skeptical about the project, perceived CPEC a threat due to number of reasons.

One of the major concerns voiced by the local leaders and civil society is exclusion of the region from formal decision-making structure of CPEC. Due to the disputed status of the region, Pakistan could not grant GB any meaningful political right, as a result, is not allowed to participate in any key decision-making process. Despite the region's geographical role, serving as an entry point of the Corridor, representation from GB has been repeatedly denied in high-level meetings, project planning. During the time of 2017, people noted that all the chief ministers of four provinces visited China with the then Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif for the One Belt, One Road forum, the exclusion of the CM of GB was seen as a discriminatory policy. At that time, the president of PPP GB chapter, Amjad Hussain called an All-Parties Conference arguing that GB lacked representation in federal decision-making forum, reflecting its continued marginalization within CPEC. He also called the project as China-Punjab Economic Corridor. According to him, as GB has no representation in National Assembly and Senates that's why GB's interest has been compromised in CPEC¹⁰².

In 2015, when the Parliamentary Committee on the CPEC was formed, GB was excluded from the committee showing the sign of marginalization. This consist of twenty-two members of parliamentarian responsible for reviewing and monitoring the implementation of CPEC. In addition, in response to a researcher inquiry, the then Chairperson of the Parliamentary Committee on CPEC, Senator Mushahid Hussain Sayed stated that GB's exclusion was not formally attributed to its lack of representation in the National Assembly, adding that the Chief Minister of GB is invited only on a needed basis.¹⁰³ It showed the informal and conditional role of GB's participation in decision related to CPEC. The phrase "we invite the Chief Minister of GB when it is required" implied that GB's involvement is not institutionalized but discretionary, dependent on federal goodwill rather than legal or constitutional entitlement. Apart from that there is a lack of contact between the GB government and the federal government leading to transparency gap between the

¹⁰¹ Horizons of CPEC in Gilgit- Baltistan: A prospective study 2017, accessed October 20, 2025, <https://akrsp.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Horizons-of-CPEC-in-Gilgit-Baltistan.pdf>.

¹⁰² Peer Muhammad, "CPEC: PPP voices concern over neglecting Gilgit-Baltistan," *Tribune*, Jan 6, 2016, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1022564/cpec-ppp-voices-concern-over-neglecting-gilgit-baltistan>.

¹⁰³ Shafqat Jabeen, Musawir Hussain Bukhari, "Gilgit-Baltistan A Gateway In China Pakistan Relations: An Overview Of Constitutional, Political, Strategic And Economic Dimensions," *Pakistan Vision* 21,no.1 2024:24, University of the Punjab, https://pu.edu.pk/images/journal/studies/PDF-FILES/2_v21_1_20.pdf.

two parties. This is a classic example of autonomy issue, where the local communities and stakeholder are excluded from key decision-making process, regarding their land and resource exploitation.

Secondly the major concerns are regarding resource capture, land, and livelihood risk. Some of the nationalist leaders pointed out that CPEC would leads to land acquisition, serving the primary interest of national or external purpose with the locals having limited payoff. As stated by Sultan Raees, one of the conveners of Awami Action Committee (AAC) that what the people of GB want is their due share in CPEC and that is not a crime¹⁰⁴. Statements like this showed the concern regarding CPEC which the local nationalist leader believed to be implemented without adequate inclusion, consultation, or benefits for the locals. People are not against the development but are just demanding their fair share and inclusion in the project. Similarly, Farooq Khan, another leader of AAC made a comment stating that the region has been promised two economic zones, but no such activity is taken place¹⁰⁵. This quote showed a sense of betrayal felt by the public. These reveals how the politics of development can be linked with territorial marginalization in GB and how the promises of economic zone remained a symbol of unfulfilled expectation, developing the narrative that CPEC would serve external economic and political interests. These leaders are not just dissatisfied by the material deprivation but also by the political invisibility. These sentiments can be depicted in a statement made by Chairperson of AAC, Ehsan Ali stating that the government feels that the leaders of AAC are being frightened by placing them in Schedule Four. They are more committed to protect the rights of the people and viewed Four Schedule as an honor¹⁰⁶. This exposed the criminalization of political activism in GB.

Thirdly, the grievances of land politics and local autonomy lie at the heart of GB's contestation over CPEC. For the locals, land is not just a mean of production but a sense of identity, heritage, and community survival. This emotional attachment was also expressed by Amjad Hussain stating

¹⁰⁴ Shabbir Mir, "Fight for rights: Committee vows to continue struggle for G-B's share in CPEC," *Tribune*, September 16, 2016, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1182817/fight-rights-committee-vows-continue-struggle-g-bs-share-cpec>.

¹⁰⁵ Shabbir Mir, "Shutters down: Awami Action Committee in G-B observes strike," *Tribune*, August 15, 2016, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1163197/shuttersdown-awami-action-committee-g-b-observes-strike?>

¹⁰⁶ "G-B: Protests against resource capture, & misuse of ATA against activists," *The High Asia*, August 5, 2024, <https://thehighasia.com/g-b-protests-against-resource-capture-misuse-of-ata-against-activists/>.

that this land is like mother to the people and we will protect this land¹⁰⁷. Local communities accused the government of using land for CPEC related projects without gaining the free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) of landowners. Because of the vague land laws, it is easy to be acquired land in the disputed territory. Reports suggested that more than more than three hundred land leases issued across GB for different projects related to CPEC¹⁰⁸. This resulted in protest across different areas of the region. Due to the ambiguous constitutional status, most residents lacked formal land titles making it easier for the authority to use the land without due process.

Other dimension of the critique of CPEC as mentioned by Amir Hussian, political analyst from Lower Hunza is regarding employment and livelihood displacement. He pointed out, “Chinese would bring their workforce for the CPEC project, around 400,000 would be working in GB. How this going to create jobs for the local? Forget about jobs, the local communities are experiencing a loss of traditional livelihood because of the project.¹⁰⁹ Other political worker Sher Babu said the lands are being taken in the name of this project, there is increasing number of Chinese workers in the region, this will turn the majority into minority¹¹⁰. Mustafa Shigri, a civil society activist showed concern regarding the transparency of the protect stated that federal government should disclosed all the project related agreement particularly regarding the land acquisition that is being inked to China that will be carried out in GB¹¹¹. So, there is a section of people seeing this project as a mechanism by which outsider would control their territory, resources, and future. The fear of demographic changes increased in the region. The increasing presence of non-local laborers, businesspeople, and security personnel under the project is perceived as a threat to the indigenous demographic composition. This very much tap into identity autonomy where the control of land and population composition is a political question as much as economic. If the demographic changes in India Occupied Kashmir after the abrogation of Article 370 of 2019 are widely

¹⁰⁷ Shabbir Mir, “CPEC project: PPP vows to protect land of G-B locals,” *Tribune*, October 27, 2016, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1212538/cpec-project-ppp-vows-protect-land-g-b-locals>.

¹⁰⁸“ Resource capture in Gilgit-Baltistan,” *The High Asia*, March 16, 2025, <https://thehighasia.com/resource-capture-in-gilgit-baltistan/>.

¹⁰⁹ S Khan, “Skepticism over Chinese investment,” *DW*, March 01, 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/skepticism-in-gilgit-baltistan-over-china-pakistan-economic-corridor/a-42010956>.

¹¹⁰ Deutsche Welle, “Skepticism in Gilgit-Baltistan over China-Pakistan Economic Corridor,” *Egypt Independence*, January 3, 2018, <https://egyptindependent.com/skepticism-gilgit-baltistan-china-pakistan-economic-corridor/>,

¹¹¹ Zarak Khan, “Anti-China protests in Gilgit-Baltistan enter 3rd week,” *Pakistan Forward*, November 1, 2023, https://pakistan.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_pf/features/2023/01/11/feature-01.

condemned as an attempted to alter the identity of disputed territory, this principle should logically also to be applied to the Indigenous people of GB.

Lastly, the main concern regarding the CPEC is over its environmental repercussion in this ecologically fragile landscape. Cutting of trees, mountains and increase in heavy vehicular movement posed a threat to glaciers. Having more than 6500 glaciers, this region is highly susceptible to glacial lake outburst floods (GLOFs). Without effective mitigation efforts, CPEC would further cause the environmental repercussion. According to the local environmentalist, for example, the Karakoram highway accommodate container traffic every 35 seconds, the locals believed that it pollutes the region and glacier melting in an already climate-sensitive zone. Some of the nationalist leaders links the environmental fears within broader political discourse. Manzoor Hussain Parwana, Chairperson of Gilgit-Baltistan United Movement (GBUM), criticized the exclusive policies of Islamabad, stating that CPEC passed through GB but was not given their due share. Instead, the region will just get smoke and environmental pollution, nothing else¹¹². This statement showed the environmental cost of CPEC without receiving any economic and political benefit. Similarly, Chairperson of the Balawaristan National Front, Nawaz Khan Naji also showed concern by quoting that many activities are going in Punjab and Gwadar, not did not see anything like that in GB¹¹³. Similarly, a statement made by a political activist from Upper Hunza, Farhan Ali that it is a known fact that Chinese implement projects without caring much about the environmental¹¹⁴.

These perceptions link the environmental impact to the absence of autonomous governance in GB. Without constitutional framework, severe environmental impact and regulatory mechanism remained weak, leading to exploitation. Consequently, all these issues lead toward multidimensional challenge, where all the issue of environmental risk, lack of representation and involvement, political marginalization, and unequal development converge within the discourse of

¹¹² “Gilgit Baltistan: The Problem of CPEC Strikes Again,” *UNPO*, February 26, 2016, <https://unpo.org/gilgit-baltistan-the-problem-of-cpec-strikes-again/>.

¹¹³ Zulfiqar Ali Khan, “Gilgit-Baltistan at the Crossroad of CPEC: Part I,” *Pamir Times*, June 24, 2019, <https://pamirtimes.net/2019/06/24/gilgit-baltistan-at-the-crossroad-of-cpec/>.

¹¹⁴ S Khan, “Skepticism over Chinese investment,” *DW*, March 01, 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/skepticism-in-gilgit-baltistan-over-china-pakistan-economic-corridor/a-42010956>.

autonomy and rights. GB's constitutional ambiguity and lack of representation in federal bodies is often cited as weakening its voice.

5.2 The Diamer-Bhasha Dam and Mining in Gilgit-Baltistan

Gilgit-Baltistan also occupied key position in two other main development projects of Pakistan: The Diamer-Bhasha Dam and recent announcement of mining by Chinese companies. Regarding the project of Diamer-Bhasha Dam, it is seen as a flagship hydroelectric and water-storage project, widely framed by the federal government and the Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) as a pillar of national energy security and water management project¹¹⁵. However, for many of the local communities, it became a flashpoint of perceived injustice and contested governance. In 2001, project feasibility study was initiated, and in 2025, it is still under development, taking more than 20 years. Leaving affected communities uncertain about their relocation, how they will be rehabilitation, and future livelihoods¹¹⁶. The agreement signed in 2010 promised land allotments, compensation, and employment, however, only 10 percent of the agreement implemented. The nationalist leaders of GB also argued that these kinds of projects are the reflection of long history of Islamabad's exploitative land policies without granting the region constitutional rights and resource ownership. The critics of the project argued that GB face the burden of submerged villages, displacement, cultural loss, and environmental cost while the main economic rewards for other provinces. This imbalance is reported in academic research highlighting widespread mental distress, social fragmentation, and economic insecurity caused by delayed and insufficient compensation among displaced households. This led to mobilization led by nationalist leaders, youth activists, tribal elders, and clerics, all united because of the view that their lands are being used to benefit others while its people remain constitutionally invisible. This sentiment expressed through the popular 31-point charter demanding "80 percent royalty of the dam, free electricity to Diamer district, full compensation for more than 18,000 acres acquired for the dam."¹¹⁷ Their main demand is their right their resources. Protest leader Maulana Hazratullah

¹¹⁵ Mubeen Adnan, "Pakistan's Ability to Mitigate Water Shortage by Making Diamer-Bhasha Dam," *JRSP*, Vol. 59, No 1, 2022, https://pu.edu.pk/images/journal/history/PDF-FILES/10_59_1_22.pdf.

¹¹⁶ Muhammad Ilyas et al., "Development-Induced Displacement and Resettlement Project Delay Impacts on Affected People: A Case Study of Diamer Basha Dam Project in Pakistan," *Sustainability* 17, no. 6 (March 9, 2025): 2387, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su17062387>.

¹¹⁷ Nisar Ali, "Hundreds hold sit-in in northern Pakistan demanding compensation for land for dam site," *Arab News*, October 24, 2025, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2590964/pakistan>.

gave voice to the collective frustration, stating “local people sacrificed everything for the project but the government was reluctant to solve the genuine demands of the local people who were going to be displaced after completion of the dam,” warning that “we will march toward the dam and stop the work at dam site if the government fails to meet our demands.”¹¹⁸ These leaders pointed out that more than 4000 families in Diamer sacrificed their land, home for the future of Pakistan but WAPDA is not compensating the locals for the lands being acquired for the dam. They also said that they will march towards the dam if the government fails to meet our demands. This kind of statement showed a transition from grievances to resistance, challenging the authority of the state. The Awami Action Committee also demanded that 75 percent of the royalties and employment opportunities should be reserved for the people of GB¹¹⁹. So, the demand is not merely overcompensation, but also about ownership and representation. Because of the constitutional limbo of the region, it did not allow the people to negotiate equitable terms of such mega-project. Slogan such as “Haqooq Do, Dam Banao” (Give rights, build the dam) revealed a paradox, emphasizing on rights and then build the dam. Their posture is not anti-development but pro-development but should be under the terms of justice and self-governance. It reflected this dual demand, that development should come with democratic inclusion. There has been increasing consciousness in local nationalist leader where resource exploitation without representation is considered as a continuation of “colonial legacy.” They believed that GB is being treated as periphery for exploitation rather than an equal stakeholder in the federal government. The deeper structural imbalance between the center and GB is quite visible.

5.3 Mining in Gilgit-Baltistan

In Gilgit-Baltistan, mining industry has been transformed from an untouched frontier into what many local describing it as a site of systematic exploitation. There has been significant increasing of mining in GB, with the Chinese firms dominated the extraction of mineral in the region. This has raised local and nationalist leaders’ concerns. The Chinese companies hold leases for high-grade copper in Astore, uranium rich sides in Hunza-Nagar, and partnering with local contractors

¹¹⁸ Nisar Ali, “Hundreds hold sit-in in northern Pakistan demanding compensation for land for dam site,” Arab News, October 24, 2025, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2590964/pakistan>.

¹¹⁹ Jamil Nagri, “Diamer-Bhasha Dam protest enters seventh week,” *Dawn*, March 29, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1900953>.

such as Shahzad International which is one of the largest foreign contractors engaged in mining uranium and gold. There are some of the Pakistani companies obtaining license in the region, but the local accused them of “economic murder” that divert the revenue away from the communities. Some of the reports suggested that more than 2,000 mining leases for gold, uranium and molybdenum have been given to Chinese firms. There are also reports of the government canceling the licenses of local miners to grant Chinese developers’ exclusive control over the mining operations. Some of the areas, such as the Chapursan valley, declared as no-go zones due to extensive Chinese activity such as tunnel building and mineral exploration operations. These activities led the locals to accused federal institution, especially the Gilgit-Baltistan Council (GBC), of bypassing local legislative bodies, deepening grievances of marginalization and exclusion of Indigenous communities from benefits and decision-making. Allegedly, there is also involvement of illegal activities and exploitation. For example, in 2024, a Chinese was arrested for illegal activities in Skardu after recovering sixty-five tons of mica by the authorities. This increased the fear that mining being conducted without legal permits. Report also suggested that more than two-third of GB’s mineral-rich areas have been leased by Chinese firms. This unregulated extraction threatened ecosystems and escalated socio-political tension¹²⁰. Recently in April 2025, MOU was signed between the Geological Survey of Pakistan and the China Geological Survey to collaborate on the exploration of over prized minerals such as lithium¹²¹. The local nationalist leaders and civil society voiced in response, questioning on local rights, decision making and sovereignty. As one of the activists during a protest that these mountains, rivers, and minerals are ours and we will not allow any kind of exploitation without our consent. On 8th April 2025, during the Pakistan Minerals Investment Forum in Islamabad, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif made a statement declaring that Pakistan has potential of trillion of dollar from mineral reserves. And if it is utilized fully, the state can say “goodbye to the IMF” and escape its mounting debt¹²². The crucial point is that his speech explicitly referred the region of GB alongside KPK and

¹²⁰ Nisar Abbas Sadpara, “Action against illegal mining: 65-ton mica recovered from Chinese national’s residence in Skardu, *The News International*, March 07, 2024, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1165397-action-against-illegal-mining-65-ton-mica-recovered-from-chinese-national-s-residence-in-skardu>.

¹²¹ “China and Pakistan Join Hands to ‘Explore Minerals’ in Gilgit-Baltistan, ” *PAMIR TIMES*, April 8, 2025, <https://pamirtimes.net/2025/04/08/81927/>.

¹²² Tanveer Abbas, “Outrage in G-B as PM Links Mineral Resources to IMF Loan Repayment” *HUM News*, April 9, 2025, <https://humenglish.com/latest/outrage-in-g-b-as-pm-links-mineral-resources-to-imf-loan-repayment/>.

Baluchistan, as a mineral rich zones. After these remarks, there was a strong backlash in GB from political, religious, and civil society actors. According to them, the PM's treated the region's mineral as a national asset to bail out Pakistan as a national asset of the locals. The AAC-GB declared that the resources of this region belong to the people and any decision regarding it should reflect their will to be dictate. The Opposition leader in the GB assembly warned that the mountains being sold off to outside interest by the named of national interest. Additionally, the federal government finalized a bill titled as Mine and Mineral Act 2025 and National Minerals Harmonization Framework 2025. This must be adopted by all the four provinces and included GB and Azad Kashmir. This bill aimed to standardized mining laws, create a process for exploration and extraction and open doors for investment in mining sector. The local nationalist leaders expressed their concern, calling out that this bill undermine local ownership over the resources. This is mainly due to the GB's ambiguous constitutional status and limited representations in federal government. This can lead to a power shifting to external investors. As GB lack full provincial status, the adoption of unified bill can bypass and weakened specific customary or communal land rights.

5.4 Conclusion

In Gilgit-Baltistan, the projects such as CPEC, the Diamer-Bhasha Dam and the mining activities placed the region of GB at a unique nexus of national ambition and local resistance. Projects such as CPEC may ensure connectivity and regional uplift but many locals fear of exploitation and extraction. Similarly, the Diamer-Bhasha dam required massive land use, resource reallocation and displacement but somehow the voices of the affected communities remained marginalized. While the activities regarding mining seemed to be more external driven, leasing out GB's rich mineral belt. Together, these projects showed a trend by which state led development in GB is pushing forward with grand initiatives, but the long history of constitutional ambiguity, limited local representation and weak resource governance structures mean that these projects invited external actors rather than inclusive development. For the local the question is not simply development for them but development by them. They raised question like who controls the corridor, who governs the dam, who owns the minerals? Without embedding institutional reforms, local legislative powers, transparent contracts, meaningful employment, royalties and environmental protections, the promise of infrastructure and resource-wealth may become a source of grievance rather than growth.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

This work set to analyze the complex and evolving nature of movements of autonomy in Gilgit-Baltistan. The main focus was on the domestic pressure and international implications shaping the region's political landscape. The constitutional ambiguity of GB cannot be understood in isolation as it is deeply connected with the broader issue of Kashmir that shaped Pakistan's diplomatic and territorial stance since 1947. The Kashmir issue has trapped the foundation of GB's political identity. Through qualitative analysis of secondary data and through the application of Constructivism and Postcolonial/Subaltern Theory, the study argues that the struggle for autonomy in GB is not just a constitutional issue but a deeper contestation over identity, representation, and broader geopolitical dynamics.

The study showed that Pakistan's adopted a paradoxical policy towards GB. As the central government emphasized on territorial integrity and national security, framing the region in context of Kashmir conflict, this led the government to prioritize policies that are controlling rather than inclusive. On one hand, the region is framed as a strategic territory for the project like CPEC and Diamer-Basha Dam. On the other hand, it remains excluded from the constitutional framework and deprived the right to be a full-fledged province. Diamer-Basha Dam and extensive mining started to deepen the grievances among local communities. This reflects a postcolonial pattern of resource exploitation. The demonstrations against the mining leases to Chinese companies and the rising of slogan such as "Kabze par kabza namanzoor" shows the growing awareness and resistances of a population denied both voice and ownership over its resources.

It also underlined the increasing entwinement of local politics with international factors. The geopolitical centrality of GB in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor has increased its importance for regional diplomacy. Lack of clear constitutional rights in GB creates a legal void for both domestic and foreign actors in which resource extraction happens with a high degree of impunity. Therefore, the autonomy movement of GB cannot be seen solely as a domestic struggle; it is also a product of global economic and political structures that meet within Pakistan's territorial governance.

In short, the study concluded that GB's quest for autonomy is now a multidimensional struggle; constitutional, economic, and symbolic. It reflected tensions between state sovereignty and local agency, development and dispossession, and national security imperatives and human security

concerns. While the government continues to view the region through strategic and economic lenses, people of GB articulate their identity through resistance, pressing claims for representation, recognition, and control over resources.

This thesis holds that the autonomy movements in Gilgit-Baltistan are not just a response to historical neglect but a forward-looking call for justice, dignity, and self-determination. The movements calling for autonomy challenges state to balance its national interests with democratic inclusiveness and to recognize that the stability of its northern frontier hinges on consent, not control. The future of GB's integration and indeed its peace and prosperity rests on transforming its people from passive subjects of development into active participants in shaping their destiny.

6.1 Policy Recommendation

The critical analysis showed GB stands at a point where the questions of constitutional ambiguity, economic exploitation and political exclusion have deepened the grievances. While the projects such as CPEC, the Diamer-Basha Dam, and projects related to mining has increased its geopolitical importance, however it has reinforced local perception of marginalization. Heading towards a sustainable and inclusive future, number of policy measures is required to address GB's constitutional, administrative, and developmental challenges.

6.1.1 Political Representation and Constitutional Integration

Primarily, it is important to end the constitutional limbo of GB. The necessity is the resolution of GB's constitutional status within the Federal of Pakistan. The absence of GB's representation in the National Assembly and Senate not just violates the principles of federal equity but also perpetuates a colonial-style governance structure. While maintaining stance on the Jammu and Kashmir dispute at international forums, Pakistan must prioritize its constitutional and moral obligation to grant the people of GB the same fundamental political rights, as enjoyed by other part of the state. This decision can be framed as an administrative and humanitarian necessity. If India can administer the territory of Jammu and Kashmir with full parliamentary representation, why not Pakistan can do the same. If not, then should be treated as Azad Jammu Kashmir with interim Constitution.

6.1.2 Institutional Reforms and Participatory Governance

To restore the confidence of local in governance, it is critical that the participatory mechanisms must be institutionalized. Consultative bodies can be established comprising local representatives,

civil society members, and community leaders to oversee major development initiatives. The GB Assembly and Chief Minister's Office must be strengthened through legislative and budgetary authority. Furthermore, the appointment of senior bureaucratic position should be prioritized to be local having knowledge of regional needs and cultural dynamics. This helped to reduce the perception that the region is being administered by external actors with limited accountability.

6.1.3 Resource Governance

As GB possessed abundant natural resources such as water, mineral, and land. The management of all these requires transparent and participatory frameworks. As the policies giving long-term leases to external entities without local consent have triggered widespread criticism. These colonies fuels resentment and is seen as internal colonialism. The major requirement is that the policies must be reoriented towards recognizing GB as the primary stakeholder in its natural resource. For this purpose, there should be Resource Management and Benefit Sharing Authority that ensure the revenues from different project reinvested in local development. The process of giving license for mining should be through open bidding processes under provincial style environmental and social safeguards. The Compensation and resettlement mechanisms should be standardized for the communities affected by the project such as the Diamer-Basha Dam. This equitable benefit sharing mechanism would not only promote economic justice nut also helps to transform development from a source of grievance into a symbol of partnership. This will ensure that the people of GB are the primary beneficiaries of their own resources.

6.1.4 Regulating External Involvement and Ensuring Transparency

As there is increasing involvement of external international actors, especially Chinese companies through CPEC and mining project, the regulatory bodies should be strengthened. All the MOUs signed with foreign companies should be declared publicly, with all the details of investment, employment, and environmental obligations accessible to the public. To prevent misuse of resource and corruption, independent audits by the Auditor General of Pakistan and local watchdog groups should play their roles. In addition, there should be an establishment of Joint Transparency Commission having the representatives from GB, the federal government and civil society. All the international agreements must be reviewed by the committee before implementation. This would institutionalize accountability and trust building between the state and citizens. Apart from that there should be minimum quotas for the locals in all externally funded projects.

6.1.5 Environmental Protection

Transparent environmental impact assessments in dams, roads, and mining projects should be carried out by following international standards. Protection of this fragile ecosystem is crucial not only for the locals but also for the larger climate security of Pakistan. Involving local NGOs in monitoring ecological changes can strengthen community ownership and ensure long-term sustainability. There should be a strategic environmental assessment for all sector-wide policies and development plans.

6.1.6 Constructive engagement with the autonomy movements

Lastly and most importantly, there should be a shift with state's approach from security oriented towards a dialogue-based engagement with the local movements calling for autonomy such as Awami Action Committee (AAC). It is important to recognize their grievances as a legitimate expression of political participation rather than taking it as a threat. The state's policy of arresting and suppressing AAC leader is very much counterproductive. Opposition can turn into cooperation by structuring dialogues, inclusion in consultative forums, and recognition of local leadership. Doing so would conform to democratic norms and enhance internal cohesion within Pakistan.

Implementing this policy recommendation will not only resolve the issue of constitutional ambiguity of GB but it will promote inclusive policy for governance, fair development, and the unity of the nation. The true meaning of stability and governance would not be achieved just by administrative control or economic promises but through justice, representation and cooperation between state and its people. By integrating these principles into policy would a step in transforming GB from a peripheral frontier into a participatory region within Pakistan's democratic federation.

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