

Focus 50 - China and Pakistan: Original Sinners of Gilgit-Baltistan and the 'Azad Jammu and Kashmir'

A tale of genocide, covert demographic engineering, slavery, and suppression

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Abstract

Recently, after abrogating Kashmir's semi-autonomous status, India declared a new domicile law for Kashmir. Pakistan has reacted strongly against this new law accusing India's Hindu-nationalist government of harbouring schemes to alter the demography of Kashmir in order to change its Muslim-majority character. In this article, it is argued that Pakistan's criticism is ethically unjustified because of its own blemished record of demographic engineering in Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) and 'Azad Jammu and Kashmir' ('AJK'). State-led demographic engineering in 'AJK' and GB is discussed, arguing that such attempts have marginalized the local Shi'a community. Pakistan has settled Sunni extremists in GB and 'AJK'. As of result, today, the region is home to intense sectarian violence and Sunni terrorist groups like Jaish-e-Muhammad and Lashkar-i-Taiba. This article also points to these demographic engineering projects, being not merely Pakistani projects: China has tremendous stakes in the demographic engineering of GB to secure its China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

Keywords

India, Domicile Law, Gilgit-Baltistan, 'Azad Jammu and Kashmir', China, CPEC, Shi'a, Sunni, Lashkar-i-Taiba, Jaish-i-Muhammad, Taliban, Kashmiri Pundits

After India announced its new domicile law in Kashmir, Pakistan upped its ante against India. PM Imran Khan alleged that India's new domicile law, by settling non-Muslims from outside Kashmir in the area, brings massive demographic changes in the new Union Territory (UT) of Jammu & Kashmir, changing its Muslim majority character. Without doubt, India's new domicile law merits a serious and objective discussion; however, Pakistan's criticism of India's new law is not only unwarranted and biased, but also ethically unjustified because of Pakistan's own blemished record.

Unlike in India's case, where the right-wing heavyweights have indulged in bombastic and jingoistic rhetoric about resettling Hindu Kashmiri Pundits and changing the domicile laws of Kashmir, without much real substance to it, Pakistan's state-sponsored demographic engineering has taken place systematically over the last four to five decades. Such projects are executed gradually, covertly led by the deep-state, and through a slew of circuitous administrative and legal measures.

Before one even talks about the demographic changes in GB (Gilgit-Baltistan) and PoK (Pakistan Occupied Kashmir) or 'AJK' ('Azad Jammu and Kashmir'), it is pertinent to mention that Pakistan's fundamental approach has been of turning the region into its colony ever since it illegally occupied it in 1947. Making demographic changes has always been an essential part of the overarching process of turning 'AJK' into its colony and complete its annexation.

With that aim, Pakistan separated GB from PoK in 1947, renamed it as the Northern Areas (Noorani, 2017), and put it under the direct control of Islamabad. Not only was it an illegal step, since GB was the part of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir, which had formally acceded to the Union of India (1947), but also a blatant violation of the decision of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) (Noorani,2017) which had recognized Pakistan as an aggressor in the 1947 Indo-Pakistan war, and asked her to withdraw from GB and 'AJK'.

The Freedom House report of 2019 confirmed that GB is undergoing government-led demographic engineering to reduce the population of the local Ismaili Shi'a community and replace them with Pakistani Sunni nationals. Also, several GB activists have accused Pakistan of settling non-locals in an organized attempt to alter the demography of the area. Since January 2001, the population ratio of 1:4 (non-locals to locals) had changed to 3:4. The state-led genocide and demographic engineering have diminished the local Shi'a population ratio from 68% to 41 %. In addition, GB has 42% recent 'in-migrants' (people with current residence/enumeration at a different place than their place of birth), the third-largest percentage in Pakistan, after the Federally Administrated Tribal Areas (FATA) (75%) and Baluchistan (44%) - another indicator of the escalation of the process of

demographic change in the recent past (Demographic and Health Survey, Pakistan, 2017-18).

Senge H Sering, the United States-based and GB-born human rights activist, has accused the Pakistani state of orchestrating a Shi'a genocide. For a moment, one may consider Senge's opinion as one-sided. However, the very fact that Sunni extremist groups like Sipah-i-Sahaba roam around with impunity in GB, slaughtering hundreds of Shi' Muslims is ample proof that the state has turned a blind eye to the genocide of members of the Shi'a community. Other anti-Shi'a terrorist groups such as Jaish, LeT, and Harkat-ul-Mujahideen also have set-up terror training camps in GB.

The genocide of Shi'a Muslims has come along with the spread of Wahhabi-Deobandi radicalization, which had its onset during General Zia's time. The first major Shi'a-Sunni riot took place in 1988 over the sighting of the Ramadan moon, in which 700 Shi'a Muslims were killed. Reportedly, 80,000 Sunni extremists came from far-off places without being stopped by security forces, raising strong possibilities of being backed by the state. Many locals alleged that General Zia had sent them. Since then, incidents of anti-Shi'a violence have significantly risen in numbers and intensity. Additionally, Islamist radicalization has led to rapid destruction of GB's liberal Sufi ethos and rich traditions of music and dance.

Large Pakistani settlements have come up in Sakwar, Manawar, Pari Bangla, Baseen, Juglote, Konodas, Sikarkoyi, Ghizer, Shardo, and Diamer. As a result, locals have turned into a minority in their capital, Gilgit. These settlements appeared after Prime Minister Zulfikar Bhutto abrogated Kashmir's land ownership act, also known as State Subject Rule (SSR), and opened the floodgates for ordinary Pakistanis to acquire residency in GB. Further, under the 2009 GBESGO (Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order), the Pakistani settlers were given formal citizenship rights in GB, encouraging more people to settle. Many prominent politicians, business tycoons, and military generals, including PM Imran Khan, Parvez Musharraf, Senator Talha Mahmood, and Hamid Gul own property in GB.

It is pertinent to mention that China also has significant stakes in the demographic engineering of GB to secure its China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project. Reportedly, Pakistan is grabbing forest and agricultural lands to transfer them to Chinese companies for large-scale infrastructure projects. In addition to the ex-army officers, and Sunni extremist clerics, lay Pakistani Sunni settlers are also being brought in as workers for Chinese projects. Wahhabi Sunni settlers have displaced the Shi'a population from villages on the Karakoram highway to secure the CPEC. Moreover, hundreds of Chinese nationals have permanently settled in GB to establish businesses, thus exploiting local natural resources. China plans to build roads, dams, and industrial zones in GB. For

instance, China is building a dam at Daimer to import electricity to Xinjiang. It is happening at the high cost of submerging 70 miles of GB's fertile land.

China's interest in GB is also motivated by the broader ambitions of controlling the Indian Ocean. China's plans to develop ports like Gawadar, Jiwani, Sonmiani, Pasni, and Ormara require absolute control over GB. A 2010 Stratfor report confirmed the presence of 7000-11,000 People's Liberation Army (PLA) troops in GB to guard its construction workers and infrastructure projects. Later, when China faced global condemnation, it pressured Pakistan to extend complete sovereignty over GB. One could witness the impact in 2018 when Pakistan nullified the Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order (GBESGO) of 2009, which granted it a degree of autonomy and made GB a province of Pakistan. In the 2018 order, the executive power became divided between the Pakistan-appointed Governor and GB Assembly; however, the Governor's decision cannot be overruled by the representatives of GB. Pakistan's repeated attempts to change the constitution of GB and GB government ordinances are intended to expedite the process of land allotment to Chinese companies.

As recently as December 2019, informed sources¹ confirmed the presence of the Chinese military with Pakistan's patrolling parties on the Line of Control (LoC), when the situation on the LoC between the two neighbours had strained after Delhi abrogated article 370.

As regards 'AJK', M Bashir Asef (1971), UK-based Convener of United Kashmir Liberation Front, mentioned some disturbing details, in his article "Azad Kashmir: A Colony of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan." Interestingly, this article was published in 1971. The details mentioned in the article confirm that as early as 1971, Pakistan was implementing its vicious agenda of colonizing 'AJK' with non-Kashmiris. Though formally, the pre-1947 restrictions on acquiring citizenship and residency are still in place, the subservient and lackey-like status of the 'AJK' legislative assembly, the 'AJK' civil service, and the army, as revealed in the article, makes it amply clear that, even in 1971, it was quite easy for the Pakistani government to facilitate the settlement of non-Kashmiris in 'AJK' through legal and illegal means.

He wrote that 'AJK' was one of the world's most 'exploited' and 'unfortunate' parts of the world. The Ministry of Kashmiri Affairs, who had absolute authority over the political and other affairs of 'AJK' governed from Rawalpindi. The 'AJK' government was openly subservient to Pakistan. With the level of influence and control Pakistan had over the 'AJK' government, they could get any resolution or law passed as they desired for the perusal of Pakistan's geostrategic interests. An example of this was 'AJK's' government order to all

¹Personal sources to the author

school going students to recite Ilhaq-i-Pakistan (accession to Pakistan) every time they arrived and left school.

Pakistan's government settled outsiders mostly Punjabis by allowing them to invest in manufacturing units. They preferred the non-Kashmiris, mostly Punjabis, over the locals. The Pakistani nationals controlled all the banks in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK). As a result, Pakistani banks cornered all the foreign exchange earnings from the remittances sent by the Kashmiri diaspora settled in the UK. Unsurprisingly, it continues even today. Further, the Rawalpindi preferred Pakistani army officers in awarding contracts of the government-owned forest lands in the 'AJK.' The marginalized locals mostly worked as laborers at bare minimum wages. They worked in oppressive conditions similar to those in Nazi concentration camps and had no right to form unions. In contrast, the contractors earned enormous profits, in some cases, even more than 800 percent after the wage and transport costs. It was a unique way of colonizing the area with non-Kashmiris to ensure that over a while, all pro-independent Kashmir voices became subjugated by pro-Pakistani elements.

Another way of settling Pakistani nationals was by recruiting them in civil services. Pakistanis handled almost all the top administrative and police posts and 95 percent of the 'AJK' civil service. The Azad Kashmir Army was formally an independent entity, however, all the officer-level ranks of captains, majors, colonels, and the chief-of-staff were Pakistani nationals, mostly Pathans from FATA. They were notorious for their cruelty and violence against Kashmiris.

Mr. Bashir's article also suggests that the Pakistani government made it very easy to acquire weapons in 'AJK', and it was settling Pathans from the FATA in 'AJK'. The idea was to settle military veterans with arms in 'AJK', which could be used to quell the local rebellion and fight against the Indian army, in the situation of war. My recent interview with Muzaffar Bandey (renamed to conserve his anonymity), a former LeT militant, supported these facts. As per his testimony, Islamabad has settled Pakistani army officers and soldiers in GB and 'AJK' in an organized and covert demographic-engineering project. A large number of them married local women and settled there. Retired army officers are generally given large tracts of land in Kotli, Mirpur ('AJK'), and GB. Lately, the trend has been of settling in Baloch and Pathans. Additionally, many Punjabis marry local women and settle in Baloch and Pathans.

Since 1971, Pakistan has come a long way in changing the demography of the region and intensifying its grip over 'AJK'. Today, 'AJK' is home to United Jihad Council and the terrorist organizations such as HM, LeT and Jaish. Their terror training camps and launch pads are in PoK. As per my informed sources, 'AJK' is under the firm grip of ISI. The ISI

keeps a strict vigil over every activity and controls every aspect of public life, as a result of which, over the years, most of the prominent Kashmiri separatist leaders have emigrated, and separatist groups like KLF have weakened in the face extreme state action and torture. Most of the terrorist organizations have penetrated ‘AJK’ posing as relief and charity organizations. Jamaat-i-Islami fronts such as ROKM (Relief Organization for Kashmiri Muslims), Al-Khidmat Foundation, and JKART (Jammu Kashmir Affectees Relief Trust) and Falah-i-Insaniyat (LeT) run huge jihadist radicalization machinery under the garb of charity and social welfare empire. These organizations have large office establishments, educational institutes, seminaries, hospitals, and orphanages. The STRATFOR report confirms that outsiders have been brought and settled in “AJK” and GB in the garb of relief and development workers. In another innovative way of bringing in outsiders, the Pakistan government brought a new lease policy in 2014 to award land to private players at throwaway prices for hydel power projects with long gestation periods. Reportedly, the state machinery uses such long-term projects to settle outsiders as employees in the project. A glance at recent statistical figures also provides robust indications of ‘AJK’ undergoing demographic change. ‘AJK’'s population rose to 4.5 million in 2017 census from 2.9 million in 1998. According to Pakistan’s Demographic and Health Survey (2017-18), (Demographic and Health Survey, Pakistan, 2017-18), in ‘AJK’ 59 % of ‘in-migrants’ were born in other provinces. The highest share comes from Punjab (42.8%). The most likely inter-regional destination (66%) for people born in ‘AJK’ is Punjab, clearly indicating to and from settlement and linkages between the people.

More recently, my informed interlocutors in KLF suggested that after the annexation of GB in 2018 and the growing Chinese presence in the wake of CPEC, the process of demographic change in GB and ‘AJK’ has intensified. Pakistan’s annexation of GB unsettled the leaders and activists in ‘AJK’, resulting in a revival of defunct separatist organizations like KLF (Kashmir Liberation Front). Both GB and ‘AJK’ have become home to severe resentment and massive protests against the Pakistani government. Most of their leaders are settled abroad with robust contacts with and funding from powerful intelligence agencies of the Western world. Therefore, Pakistan, fearful of the possibility of a massive rebellion by the separatist organizations, has started settling surrendered militants of TTP (Tahreek-e-Taliban Pakistan), and people associated with Jaish and LeT in ‘AJK’ and GB. Reportedly, the Pakistani army and ISI help them acquire lands sanctioned for agriculture and development work. After the abrogation of article 370, Indian Intelligence intercepted Pashto conversations confirming the fears of Pakistan having settled Pathans in large numbers in ‘AJK,’ and its plans to infiltrate Pathans into Kashmir.

Interestingly, outsiders, including the people with affiliations to terrorist organizations, are being settled as ordinary business people who can mingle with the local populace without coming under the scrutiny. Such people work not only as spies and in establishing linkages with disgruntled separatists, but are also expected to act as mobilizers and proxy warriors of the Pakistani army in the event of a local revolt or Indian offensive.

Conclusion

Pakistan has made systematic efforts in the demographic engineering of GB and 'AJK' to achieve its geostrategic objective: a final accession of the region to Pakistan. The process has been multifaceted and all-encompassing. Along with settling Pakistani Sunni nationals, Pakistan unleashed the forces of Wahhabi-Deobandi extremism to radicalize the socio-political milieu in a region which used to reject Jinnah's two-nation theory and held liberal Sufi-traditions in high-esteem. Sunni-extremist radicalization facilitated the deep entrenchment of pro-Pakistani terrorist groups, the Pakistani army, and has made it extremely difficult for Shi'a Muslims, Ahmadiyya, and non-Muslim communities, to survive.

Secondly, to strengthen its position, Pakistan suppressed all critical voices. Hundreds of activists have been executed and given life-time sentences in false charges of terrorism and spying. A large number of them emigrated to other countries. Pakistan has also made continuous attempts to modify local elections rules and governance structures to expedite demographic change and to elect candidates favoring China's involvement in local affairs. As a further matter, China has massive stakes in demographic engineering in GB, and 'AJK' Chinese involvement is leading to the marginalization of local ethnic groups and the destruction of linguistic and cultural diversity and ecological wealth of the region.

Pakistan has been consistent in its demographic-engineering project. Not only GB and 'AJK,' but Pakistan also extended its demographic-engineering projects in IAJK (India-Administered Jammu and Kashmir) and Baluchistan. As a part of them, Pakistan-sponsored terrorists forcibly expelled 3.5 lakh Kashmir Pundits from the valley in 1989-90. More recently, there have been attempts to force such migrations of Hindus from Doda-Kishtwar and Pooch-Rajauri by resorting to the help of their proxy terrorist groups. In another alarming development, Pakistan, through its proxies, is also colonizing the Jammu region with Muslims to alter its Hindu-majority character.

Lastly, in IAJK also, the demographic engineering project has been accompanied by force-multiplying factors such as Islamist radicalization of the society at the grassroots, making it difficult for non-Muslims to survive.

Note:

Due to the delicate nature of the subject of this commentary, there is not much written evidenced-based material available in open sources and academic journals. Hence, I have complemented the available material in academic and journalistic sources with the information provided by some ex-militants of Hizbul Mujahidin and Lashkar-i-Taiba, who received their training in ‘AJK.’ They were witness to Pakistan’s covert demographic engineering initiatives. For this article, I also consulted a few former intelligence officers of India and Pakistan, and residents of GB and ‘AJK,’ who included activists of the Kashmir Liberation Front and some journalists based in GB and ‘AJK.’ Material available in open sources was confirmed by telephone and personal interviews with the individuals mentioned above. However, due to pressing security reasons, I have chosen not to disclose their real names and identities.

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