

DOI: 10.53555/ks.v10i2.4078

Protest Against Pakistan In Pakistan-Occupied Jammu And Kashmir And Gilgit-Baltistan: A Critical Analysis

Dr Ganesh Malhotra*

*A Strategic and Political Analyst University of Jammu

Email id- ganeshmalhotra4@gmail.com

Abstract

The territories of Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) and the remainder of Pakistan-Occupied Jammu & Kashmir (PoJK) represent a critical axis within the contemporary Himalayan security architecture. These regions are considered “indivisible parts” of the sovereign Union of India, as established by the 1947 Instrument of Accession (Singh, 2021). This legal foundation informs India’s diplomatic stance, military strategy, and broader geopolitical engagement in the region. Gilgit-Baltistan, in particular, holds significant strategic importance as the “virtual pivot” of the Himalayan arc, situated at the intersection of the Himalayas, the Karakoram, the Hindu Kush, and the Pamirs (Singh, 2021). The region’s location at this mountainous nexus has historically facilitated territorial leverage and the projection of influence along key transcontinental corridors, underscoring its persistent relevance in regional power dynamics and connectivity initiatives.

Keywords: Instrument of Accession, Geostrategic depth, Occupied Territories, Cosmetic changes.

1. Introduction: The Strategic and Geopolitical Landscape

The territories of Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) and the remainder of Pakistan-Occupied Jammu & Kashmir (PoJK) constitute a critical pivot in the contemporary Himalayan security architecture. From the perspective of Indian strategic interests, these regions are not merely disputed peripheral zones but are “*indivisible parts*” of the sovereign Union of India by virtue of the 1947 Instrument of Accession (Singh, 2021). This foundational legal position shapes India’s diplomatic, military, and geopolitical outlook toward the region. The strategic significance of Gilgit-Baltistan, in particular, is profound; it serves as the “*virtual pivot*” of the broader region, situated at the unique confluence of the world’s most formidable mountain ranges—the Himalayas, Karakoram, Hindu Kush, and the Pamirs (Singh, 2021). Control over this mountainous crossroads has historically conferred not only territorial advantage but also influence over transcontinental connectivity.

Geographically, GB represents the vital connective tissue of the Eurasian landmass. It occupies a position of extraordinary geostrategic depth, straddling the narrow Wakhan Corridor of Afghanistan, bordering China’s Xinjiang province, and providing the only terrestrial link between the so-called “iron brothers,” Pakistan and China. This singular geography transforms the region from a remote high-altitude frontier into a fulcrum of continental strategy. Historically, such terrain functioned as a chessboard during the nineteenth-century “Great Game” between imperial powers. In the contemporary era, this strategic competition has re-emerged in a modern, infrastructure-driven form through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). For India, the consolidation of CPEC infrastructure across the occupied territory is not merely an economic undertaking but a strategic manoeuvre aimed at institutionalizing a contested status quo. The continued Pakistani control over these areas thus represents, in India’s assessment, a standing violation of territorial integrity—further compounded by the deepening Sino-Pakistani nexus which seeks to permanentize occupation through roads, tunnels, dams, and dual-use logistical corridors (Singh, 2021).

Yet beyond the visible infrastructure and cartographic contestations lies a deeper, more consequential dimension: the internal legitimacy crisis within these territories. The populations of GB and PoJK have existed in what may be described as a prolonged state of constitutional limbo for over seven decades. Unlike citizens of mainland Pakistan, residents of these regions remain excluded from full constitutional incorporation and representation. Their ambiguous political status denies them meaningful sovereignty, participatory governance, and enforceable constitutional protections. This structural alienation is not accidental but systemic. It stems from a trifecta of grievances: the deliberate withholding of permanent political status, patterns of economic extraction that disproportionately benefit external actors, and policies of demographic alteration designed to dilute indigenous identities and recalibrate local power balances (Bansal, 2018).

The cumulative effect of these dynamics has manifested in escalating public unrest, particularly visible through 2021. Movements such as the “Wheat Subsidy Movement” (Gandum Subsidy Tehreek) initially emerged around bread-and-butter concerns, protesting inflation and the withdrawal of subsidies. However, these mobilizations gradually evolved into broader articulations of political disenchantment. Slogans such as “Kargil Chaloo” signalled not only economic frustration but also an identity-driven assertion that questioned the prevailing administrative arrangement. The trajectory of protest reveals a fundamental breakdown of Pakistan’s implicit “social contract” with the governed population in these territories.

As Islamabad has sought to reconfigure the region’s administrative status through incremental, largely cosmetic orders, primarily to streamline Chinese investment flows, the indigenous population has increasingly interpreted these measures as attempts to consolidate control without granting genuine autonomy. Consequently, what began as utilitarian economic agitation has transformed into existential discourse centred on dignity, representation, and sovereignty. This evolution marks

a decisive inflection point in the Himalayas' geopolitical trajectory. The region is no longer defined solely by interstate rivalry; it is increasingly shaped by the assertive political consciousness of its inhabitants, whose voices now challenge the structural architecture of their long-standing disenfranchisement.

2. Historical Genesis and the Legal Architecture of Occupation

The current geopolitical deadlock in GB and PoJK stems from the strategic deceptions of 1947–1948. On October 26, 1947, Maharaja Hari Singh signed the Instrument of Accession in favour of India, legally transferring the entire princely state, including the frontier districts of Gilgit and Baltistan, to the Indian Union (Singh, 2021). However, while India's leadership was busy dealing with the Pakistan Army attack under the guise of tribal invasion unleashed by Pakistan in the Jammu and Kashmir sectors, the northern region was "deceitfully usurped" through a local rebellion facilitated by residual British officers, notably those within the Gilgit Scouts and elements of the Pakistani establishment (Singh, 2021).

The British interest in the region was historically anchored in the 1932 lease, a 60-year agreement between the British Raj and the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir designed to monitor Czarist Russian movements. The premature revocation of this lease in 1947 was followed not by a peaceful transfer to the Maharaja, but by a premeditated breach of sovereignty. British partisan sympathies toward the Pakistani establishment allowed for a hasty and controversial "accession" to Pakistan, which occurred under conditions of mass violence that Indian strategic circles view as a historical illegality (Singh, 2021; Bansal, 2018).

This legal limbo reached a zenith with the 1963 Sino-Pakistan Border Agreement. In a move India views as a total violation of sovereign rights, Pakistan illegally ceded 5,130 square miles of the Trans-Karakoram Tract to China. India maintains that neither China nor Pakistan possesses the *locus standi* to trade territory that belongs to the state of Jammu & Kashmir (Singh, 2021).

3. The "Gandum Subsidy Tehreek": A Case Study in Economic Resistance

The "Gandum Subsidy Tehreek" (Wheat Subsidy Movement), led by the Gilgit-Baltistan Awami Action Committee (GB-AAC), stands as the most significant mobilization in the region's history. It serves as the primary case study for the "Bread and Sovereignty" nexus, where the failure of the state to provide basic food security catalysed a revolutionary demand for political agency.

Rooted in widespread public anger over the abrupt reduction and administrative mishandling of wheat subsidies, the movement highlighted the centrality of subsidized grain to household survival in a geographically isolated, economically constrained region. As prices surged and livelihoods were strained, the issue of wheat ceased to be merely an economic grievance; it became a symbol of systemic neglect and peripheral status. Under the coordinated leadership of the GB-AAC, disparate social, sectarian, and political groups converged around a unified platform, demonstrating rare collective solidarity. The Tehreek thus illustrated how economic deprivation, when intertwined with longstanding political disenfranchisement, can generate a disciplined and sustained form of popular resistance anchored in both material necessity and aspirations for self-determination.

The Biography of Resistance: Ehsan Ali

The movement in Gilgit-Baltistan found one of its most enduring voices in Ehsan Ali, a veteran political activist whose five-decade-long career mirrors the region's protracted struggle for political rights and constitutional recognition. As a young student in Peshawar, Ali was deeply influenced by the progressive ideology of the Mazdoor Kisan Party, which emphasized class struggle and grassroots mobilization. His political consciousness was further shaped in Karachi in 1977, where global decolonization movements and debates on self-determination sharpened his critique of centralized power structures.

Returning to Gilgit-Baltistan in 1986, Ali confronted what he described as the "granite block" an entrenched alliance of local elites, Pakistani bureaucratic authority, and military patronage networks that resisted democratic reform. Determined to institutionalize dissent, he founded the Gilgit-Baltistan Democratic Front, providing an organized platform for political assertion. His activism came at significant personal cost: he faced 16 FIRs, six sedition charges, and endured custodial torture. Over time, Ali broadened the movement's scope, transforming it from a primarily left-oriented struggle into an inclusive coalition of 23 groups, uniting religious scholars, nationalist factions, civil society actors, and student organizations under a shared demand for rights and representation.

The Dependency Trap

Historically, regions such as Hunza in Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) were largely self-sufficient, producing nearly 75% of their wheat requirements through traditional agro-pastoral systems adapted to mountainous terrain. However, over time, state-led economic restructuring altered this balance. Under policies promoted by the Pakistani bureaucracy, often in partnership with the Aga Khan Development Network, subsistence agriculture was gradually replaced with high-value cash crops such as cherries, apples, and potatoes. Though framed as modernization and integration into national markets, this transition eroded local food sovereignty and increased vulnerability to external supply chains.

By 2021, GB's wheat self-reliance had sharply declined to just 4.37%, rendering the region heavily dependent on subsidized wheat transported from Punjab. When the Pakistan Peoples Party government reduced these subsidies in 2011 under IMF pressure, flour prices surged dramatically from Rs 820 per 100kg bag in 2009 to Rs 1400 in 2014 undermining the long-standing social contract between the state and the periphery.

The 2014 General Strike: Revolutionary Unity

The March 2014 general strike marked a defining moment of collective resistance and political awakening in Gilgit-Baltistan. What began as an agitation against the withdrawal of wheat subsidy soon transformed into a powerful region-wide mobilisation

demanding economic justice and political accountability. The strike achieved an extraordinary “wheel-jam and shutter-down” response across all seven districts, paralysing transport, markets, and administrative functioning. Its most remarkable feature was the unprecedented sectarian harmony it fostered. In a region historically vulnerable to sectarian tensions, Shia, Sunni, and Ismaili communities stood together with rare solidarity. Protesters not only raised unified slogans but also protected each other’s congregational prayers and organised shared community kitchens, symbolising a deeper social cohesion beyond political demands.

The scale of participation was historic. In Gilgit city alone, an estimated 40,000 to 50,000 people travelled by tractor, motorcycle, and on foot to join the demonstrations. Beyond restoration of the subsidy, the protesters demanded a “50-50 formula,” insisting that at least half of the 25 billion rupees collected annually as sales tax from the region be reinvested locally.

4. Governance as Repression: From the 2009 Order to the 2018 Dictatorship

Pakistan’s administrative control over Gilgit-Baltistan has unfolded through a calibrated sequence of “cosmetic changes” that preserve the illusion of self-rule while systematically deepening Islamabad’s authority, particularly in the context of advancing CPEC-related strategic interests. The Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order of 2009 was initially projected as a progressive step toward autonomy. In reality, it institutionalized a framework in which decisive powers remained firmly concentrated in federal hands. The subsequent Gilgit-Baltistan Order of 2018 further entrenched this pattern, transforming administrative management into overt central domination. Together, these instruments constitute what analysts term an architecture of “administrative hegemony” (Bansal, 2018).

The 2018 Order, in particular, marked a decisive shift from managed oversight to near-direct rule. It effectively legitimized the incremental “gobbling up” of the region by granting the Prime Minister of Pakistan sweeping authority over legislative and executive affairs. The Prime Minister assumed the power to nullify any resolution passed by the Gilgit-Baltistan Assembly, rendering the local legislature subordinate and politically inconsequential. Even more troubling, the Prime Minister was placed beyond the jurisdiction of the Gilgit-Baltistan judiciary, insulating federal authority from local legal scrutiny and positioning the executive above the law (Bansal, 2018).

From an Indian analytical perspective, these measures reflect calculated and “nefarious designs” aimed at diluting indigenous political agency. By modifying institutional structures while preserving a façade of reform, Islamabad has ensured continued political disenfranchisement, simultaneously providing legal cover for strategic and foreign-backed infrastructure initiatives in the region (Singh, 2021; Bansal, 2018).

5. Demographic Engineering and the Erosion of State Subject Rules

A critical component of the occupation strategy is “demographic engineering” to dilute the local Shia majority and political identity. This was achieved through the abolition of the “State Subject Rule” in Gilgit Baltistan. (Bansal, 2018).

The removal of this rule allowed for the settling of mainland Pakistanis, primarily Punjabis, in the region. This demographic shift is widely interpreted, from an Indian analytical perspective, as a deliberate attempt to alter the ethno-sectarian balance and weaken indigenous political aspirations. By encouraging inward migration and enabling land ownership by outsiders, Islamabad is perceived to have systematically transformed the socio-political character of Gilgit-Baltistan.

This policy serves what has been described as a “militarized counterinsurgency architecture” aimed at creating internal fault lines within society. The strategy allegedly relies on fostering sectarian polarization and socio-economic competition between locals and settlers. The 2012 massacres in Kohistan and Chilas where 25 Shia passengers were separated from Sunnis and executed are viewed in the Indian perspective as state-acquiesced violence used to distract the population from demanding constitutional rights (Bansal, 2018). Such incidents are interpreted not merely as isolated sectarian attacks, but as symptoms of a broader governance pattern that benefits from instability.

By pitching locals against non-locals and Shias against Sunnis, Islamabad ensures that the population is too internally divided to mount a unified challenge to federal authority (Memon, n.d.). In this reading, demographic reconfiguration becomes both a political tool and a strategic instrument of long-term control.

6. The CPEC Factor: Economic Corridor or Colonial Project?

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has intensified grievances, shifting local perception from “pessimistic positivity” to an outright rejection of what is seen as a colonial-style extractive venture. Initially projected as a transformative development initiative promising infrastructure, employment, and regional connectivity, CPEC has instead generated anxiety among many residents of Gilgit-Baltistan. The gap between official narratives and lived realities has widened, reinforcing the belief that local voices are marginalized in decision-making processes and that economic benefits are disproportionately diverted elsewhere.

Key concerns include:

- a. **Forced Evictions:** In the Maqpoon Das area, the administration forcibly evicted locals to allocate land for CPEC without compensation or relocation (OHCHR, 2018). Such actions have fuelled perceptions of dispossession and strengthened resistance movements.
- b. **Economic Inequality:** While Pakistan collects massive taxes from Gilgit Baltistan, only “meagre budgets” are returned. Local leaders like Haider Shah Rizvi have thundered against this, calling for a “50-50” formula to stop the region from being treated as an internal colony. This fiscal imbalance reinforces longstanding structural grievances.
- c. **Sovereignty Violations:** From the Indian perspective, CPEC is a violation of sovereignty as it passes through territory claimed by India. Pakistan’s attempt to absorb GB as its “fifth province” is seen as an effort to provide legal cover for Chinese investments (Singh, 2021).

7. Human Rights Framework: Enforced Disappearances and Judicial Failure

The human rights situation is characterized by systemic violations and a total lack of access to justice, as documented by OHCHR (2018) and Amnesty International (2021).

Critical Human Rights Challenges

1. Enforced Disappearances: While thousands are missing, the case of Mudassar Naru and the 2021 abduction of activist Seengar Noonari illustrate the reach of federal intelligence agencies (Amnesty, 2021).
2. Military Justice and Judicial Failure: The 2021 military court trial of Idris Khattak for "espionage" without public evidence highlights the lack of due process. Military courts and media tribunals impede accountability (Amnesty, 2021).
3. Abuse of Anti-Terrorism Laws: The ATA and "Schedule 4" target political activists. Ehsan Ali's 16 FIRs and 6 sedition charges are a microcosm of this repression.
4. Restrictions on Expression: The 2021 Pakistan Media Development Authority Ordinance enables press censorship through "media tribunals" and steep fines. Attacks on journalists like Absar Alam and Asad Toor further stifle dissent (Amnesty, 2021).
5. Religious and Gender Hostility: Hostility toward the Aurat March and systematic desecration of Ahmadi places of worship—often with police acquiescence—reveal a climate of state-sponsored intolerance (Amnesty, 2021).

Conclusion: Synthesis and Future Outlook

The protests in Gilgit Baltistan through 2021 represent far more than periodic economic unrest; they signify a deep rejection of what many demonstrators describe as "fake representation" and the "schemes of America and China to colonize our land". At the heart of the agitation lies a demand for dignity, political agency, and constitutional clarity. As Haider Shah Rizvi famously stated, "Humans need dignity... Do you think wheat is enough? Even animals eat wheat and grass" (Memon, n.d.). His words captured the moral core of the movement: material subsidies cannot substitute for political rights and self-respect.

The Gandum Subsidy Tehreek, initially centred on the withdrawal of wheat subsidies, evolved into a broader assertion of identity and resistance against what protestors viewed as exploitative governance and externally driven economic projects. Demonstrators questioned the legitimacy of decision-making structures imposed without full constitutional recognition or meaningful representation. The scale and cohesion of the protests suggested not a spontaneous outburst, but an organized articulation of long-standing grievances.

From an Indian perspective, these developments reinforce the argument that instability in Gilgit Baltistan stems from the unresolved status of the region. The Indian position maintains that any durable resolution must involve the vacation of occupied territories and adherence to the historical Instrument of Accession. The unprecedented unity displayed during the Gandum Subsidy Tehreek indicates the emergence of a new, articulate leadership one that increasingly views the constitutional empowerment experienced by Indian Ladakh as a more viable and dignified alternative to what many perceive as Pakistan's enduring constitutional limbo.

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