**[Sectarian harmony](https://www.dawn.com/news/1786010/sectarian-harmony)**

[Jan-e-Alam Khaki](https://www.dawn.com/authors/1133/jan-e-alam-khaki) Published November 3, 2023 Updated a day ago

GILGIT-BALTISTAN was recently in the news because of a sectarian stand-off. Luckily, the ulema in GB agreed to put their sectarian differences aside and help the regional government maintain law and order. The move reflected the wisdom of the religious leaders of two communities, who in the spirit of true Muslim brotherhood, decided to resolve mutual differences through dialogue and discussion.

But putting aside sectarian strife means that it has only been suppressed temporarily. How can communities in GB (and maybe elsewhere) resolve thorny faith-related issues on a long-term basis?

As an editorial in this paper rightly points out: “Communal differences may only be a trigger for the protests, as there are several underlying factors in GB fuelling disaffection in the region.” Among these underlying factors is the sociocultural landscape.

GB comprises several breathtaking valleys. The region may appear like a monolith, but in fact, it is not one. Its population comprises various, distinct cultures in terms of language, outlook and faith traditions. Its religious landscape comprises four major Muslim communities — Sunnis, Shias, Ismailis and Noor Bukhshis, often found in clearly defined areas. However, many villages and towns host mixed populations. There are many intercommunal marriages, but the atmosphere is generally very peaceful. For example, in my village in Hunza, there were a few members of the Sunni community and around a dozen Shia families some decades ago, but incidents of violence were unheard of.

Religious differences in GB can flare up on account of political factors.

They were well integrated in the same village as was the case in other villages of GB. Issues would randomly crop up in the relatively urban city of Gilgit where many communities live and earn, vying for a few jobs. The area is now a hotbed of political activity often influenced by the political orientations of southern Pakistan. This external factor often makes GB, metaphorically speaking, a ‘seismically active’ zone. The rise and fall of rival political parties have a direct bearing on GB politics.

Added to this factor is the contentious issue of GB’s political position. Afzal Shigri, who belongs to the area, rightly calls it “a constitutional black hole”, which is neither fully integrated with, nor fully independent of, Pakistan, but often referred to as a ‘disputed area’, leading to a confused political status. It has no representation in the federal constitutional bodies, such as the National Assembly or Senate, or access to Supreme Court, due largely to disputed relations. For as long as the area was undereducated, there was little turmoil. But gradually political consciousness rose and as of now, there are more educated and enlightened youth. As they become intellectually astute, they also acquire political sensitivity and are, therefore, in ever-louder voices, demanding a constitutional status for GB.

Sectarian differences also erupt on the pretext of some provocative issue or the other, or because of adverse statements from popular religious leaders, and can add to existing tensions. Historically, differences over the interpretations of faith have existed for a long time. Though in many regions these differences have subsided, and there is some semblance of communal harmony, contentions still exist. However, people have learnt to manage their disagreements to live peacefully.

Together, these matters exacerbate sectarian strains in some places, and have even made religion an ultra-sensitive subject though it does not affect any community’s interests directly as state policies are based on non-sectarian strategies. Religion, which should, first and foremost, try and achieve the objective of bringing humanity together, has now become for many, including in GB, a factor in discord.

In my opinion, the first step towards peace would be for the ulema of all schools of thought to refrain from stirring up emotions with rhetorical and hyperbolic speeches that can lead to ill feelings for each other. We should resist the temptation to scratch old wounds, which can kindle new conflicts. The good news is that many seasoned ulema are nowtaking a more positive approach towards other communities, and hopefully, this trend will persist into the future.

GB, in sum, is on the highway of development — this is a strong motivation for higher education, women empowerment, greater upward mobility of its educated class, the cost-effective use of agricultural products. So, staying on this path of development is in the best interest of all communities. Therefore, communities should be proud of helping, rather than, hurting each other in the 21st century’s global village.

*The writer is an educationist.*

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