**Sociology of Sectarian Politics in Gilgit-Baltistan**

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October 4, 2022

Gilgit-Baltistan has historically been hijacked by internal sectarian and external forces such as the British, Dogras and Kashmiris. Therefore, its people have always struggled to achieve their political, social and economic rights. Given the recent controversy over the “Women’s Sports Gala” and the subsequent decrees issued by the sectarian forces, it is paramount to study the sociology of sectarian politics. These forces have usurped the region of basic political rights and become an obstruction in the way of creating a popular resistive force to the external occupying forces.

Historically speaking, in late 1988, a Shia massacre happened in Gilgit-Baltistan amid the cold war between America and the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. It was supposedly an organised state-sponsored attempt to change the demography of the region, populated by a Shia community. In the 80s, Gilgit-Baltistan was the only region in Pakistan with a Shia majority. But all this changed thanks to General Zia-ul-Haq, who induced sectarian elements in the region by infiltrating Sunni people from Punjab and other parts of Pakistan into GB. Since then, Gilgit-Baltistan has not recovered from the sectarianism of political discourse, as violence has been used as an instrument to control the region. It is done by using the internal sectarian forces working for the external occupying forces to keep people engaged in conflicts.

It is not that the people of GB are unaware of what is happening in the socio-political landscape of the region. Rather, they are fully cognizant of their social, political and economic rights. But every time they raise the issue of due recognition and other basic rights, a sectarian incident engulfs it. More than the external forces, it is the internal sectarian forces who are apparently a big hurdle in the path of creating a popular uprising against the exploitation of Gilgit-Baltistan and its resources without giving the region its due rights. They are the real culprits behind the propagation of external rule in Gilgit-Baltistan. Had Gilgit-Baltistan been freed from these divisive religious forces, the region would have long received its due recognition.

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The recent objection of the Sunni and Shia religious forces to the “Women’s Sports Gala” is the case in point, as clerics from both sects have opposed the right of young girls to play at Lalik Jan Ground. They have issued decrees that Islam does not allow girls to play football or, for that matter, any other sports. They want women to stay within four walls of the house, which is simply an outright onslaught on the freedom of action of women of Gilgit-Baltistan. But unfortunately, the state of Pakistan is taking no action for such a blatant violation of human rights. Consequently, the sectarian forces are getting emboldened by the day.

Another reason why sectarian politics is popular is that the region is littered with religious seminaries where people are exposed to a one-sided sectarian view of their sect. They are being fed with a falsified narrative of the Shia-Sunni conflict and transformed into sectarian zealots. This is mainly because of the absence of an enlightened education system. Until the hegemony on political and religious discourse by these religious seminaries is countered with a moderate education system, young girls of Gilgit-Baltistan can’t fulfil their dreams of becoming footballers, cricketers, pilots, climbers and so on. Above all, with these divisive sectarian forces at play, Gilgit-Baltistan cannot put up a cogent resistance against the exploitation of the region and raise its voice for its rights.

Additionally, there is a serious internet blackout going on in different parts, where access to the internet is still not available. People of such localities rely either on television or religious seminaries for interpretation of different worldly issues. Such places are the right spots for religious forces to induce their hardened sectarian views. Take, for example, the recent Shia-Sunni conflict at Astore valley. People were physically ready to wage a sectarian war on their neighbourhoods–with whom they have been living for decades–over the religious names assigned to different points (Chowks) from Gilgit to Astore. This indicates that the sectarian forces are getting stronger, as a result of the absence of moderate information on different social issues, which can counter rigid sectarian tendencies.

Conclusively, the people need to counter these religious forces to stop unconstitutional internal rule. For that, women and young girls should take the lead against these hypocritical leaders working as an extension of external forces.

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