

Gilgit-Baltistan and its Saga of Unending Human Rights Violations, by Alok Bansal, New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2018, pp. 291, Rs 795

*Zainab Akhtar**

In general, the contemporary and historical narrative of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) is mostly woven through the prism of Kashmir issue, disregarding comprehensive information about strategically important regions like Ladakh and Gilgit-Baltistan (GB). In the study of India–Pakistan relations, most scholars and analysts tend to overlook GB, which explains the sparse literature on and information about the region. Through this book, Alok Bansal, makes an honest attempt to enlighten the readers about the geographical, demographical, cultural and strategic importance of the region, asserting that ‘it as an important part of the State of Jammu and Kashmir’. According to him, Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s speech on the eve of Independence Day in 2016 that mentioned the human rights violations in GB was the first time India overtly mentioned the region as part of India. This, the writer believes, opened the eyes of the Indians and increased their curiosity to know more about this isolated region under the control of Pakistan.

Now, post the abrogation of article 370 by the government and the bifurcation of the state of J&K into two union territories—Ladakh and Jammu and Kashmir—Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK), which includes GB, is back in the news. The Indian government’s stand that since the Kashmir issue is off the table, and that any bilateral dialogue

* The reviewer is a Research Analyst at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi.



with Pakistan will now be on PoK has created a curiosity amongst readers to know more about the region. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's official statement that India will have physical jurisdiction of PoK some day has cleared New Delhi's stand once and for all. This makes the book's contents timely and informative.

As echoed in its title, the book aims to highlight the gross human rights violation in the region; expose Pakistan's odious attempt to spread radicalisation; and finally, establish the link between GB and the state of J&K. The book does manage to justify some of these assertions, while a few are addressed abruptly and left without further elucidation. To some extent, this book manages to expose Pakistan's horrendous mission to change the demography of the region by inserting radical elements and settling mainland Pakistanis (especially Punjabis) in the region. According to Bansal, the abolishment of the state subject rule in the region by the Pakistani government and the construction of the Karakoram Highway (KKH) opened the floodgates of migration for outsiders, thus changing the demographic profile of the region. On the other hand, it has to be noted that in both PoK and on the Indian side of J&K, the state subject law granted by the erstwhile maharaja remains intact till date. The scraping of state subject rule in GB indicates the ulterior motives of the Pakistan government.

The author makes another interesting observation while talking about sectarian violence. He argues that the internal fault lines in GB have been created by the Government of Pakistan so that the people have no time to demand their political and constitutional rights from Islamabad. In pursuit of this, the Pakistan government made a conscious effort to win the hearts and minds of the Sunni minority in the region by further polarising them through religious sermons and training. In doing so, they ensured the continuity of religious tensions between the different sects, and also terrorised the majority Shia population through Sunni extremism. It has to be noted that the locals in GB were peace-loving people who had co-existed for a long time, but the demographic engineering by Islamabad made the situation volatile in the region by pitching locals versus locals (Shias–Sunnis) and locals versus non-locals (people settled from the mainland). The horrendous killings of Shias in Kohistan and Chilas by extremist groups affiliated to Ahle Sunnat Wal Jammāt (ASWJ) militants on 28 February and 3 April 2012, in which 20 Shia *Baltis* were shot dead, exposes this nefarious design of Islamabad. The author further stresses that the Pakistan government has made cosmetic changes through GB Order 2009 and 2018 to give an impression of autonomy, but the real attempt is to separate the region

from other parts of PoK and eventually gobble it up. Referring to the new GB Order 2018, he writes:

The new order further curtails the power of GB's toothless assembly and makes the PM of Pakistan the lord and master of the region. The order gives PM dictatorial power over the region with complete immunity for his actions. And most importantly he has the power to invalidate any resolution passed by GB Assembly while being not answerable to its Judiciary. (p. 136)

This is an example of the strategies used by Islamabad to modify and stifle the rights of the people.

The people of GB undoubtedly feel alienated and frustrated, and are not happy with the way they are being treated by the Pakistan government. They have been protesting for their due rights for a long time, but their voices have been silenced by referring it to be a part and parcel of the Kashmir issue. The people of GB specially feel cheated and betrayed as, despite the Kashmir issue, PoK enjoys an autonomous status, their state subject remains intact, and they have far more rights than them. The author rightly points out that 'a concerted effort has been made to obliterate historical and cultural linkages of the region with rest of PoK as well the Indian side of Jammu and Kashmir' (p. 131). Here, the author may well have exposed the sinister motives of the Pakistan government as to why it is using a completely different policy to deal with GB as compared to PoK. A critical analysis of the same could have been a significant contribution and addition to the literature of the otherwise under-studied region.

Bansal underlines the fact that even though GB is constitutionally a part of India, successive Indian governments have not made a meaningful attempt to reclaim the region. He, however, does not inquire into the political silence on India's part over the region, which is necessary, especially now after Jaishankar's overt official statement about India's claim over the region. Baltistan was historically part of the Ladakh *wazaart* (administration) and shares historical and cultural linkages with Ladakh. They have more in common with Ladakhis than with the Kashmiris they are associated with on both sides of the border. It is to be noted that the Hill Council status to Kargil and Leh, and now the Union Territory status to Ladakh by the Government of India, has been highly appreciated by the people of Baltistan. They have been demanding a similar status under Pakistan, with a provision to empower the locals but it has never been reciprocated by the government. Whenever there is a protest in Baltistan, in order to irritate the Pakistani government, they march towards the Indian border shouting, 'Kargil Chalo'. There is a

strong demand by the locals on both sides to re-establish the historical and cultural links and to open the border routes, Kargil–Skardu and Turtuk–Kaphlu, on humanitarian grounds. If Kashmir, despite being a conflict-ridden region, can have open routes with Pakistan for trade and human movement, then why not the same with the people of Ladakh, who otherwise are considered peaceful? This is a question which the book should have made an attempt to answer, in order to make it a more holistic study.

According to the author, the book is an attempt to fill the knowledge gap about the region of GB by reinforcing India's claim that it is still part of the J&K state. It indeed does a great job by talking about the region in a all-inclusive manner, about its culture, population, unique languages and geography, but lacks a comprehensive analysis of why and how India should/can make its case strong to reclaim the region. There is a dearth of evidence and data while making assertions about human rights violations and demographic changes by the Government of Pakistan. Thus, though it is a great historical account of GB and a guide for the people who have no knowledge of the region and its history, it lacks an in-depth analysis that could be equally useful for the scholars and students of international relations, especially those studying Pakistan.

Since 1947, Pakistan has managed to keep the people of GB in an illusionary bubble that they are Pakistanis and someday will be made a constitutional part of the country. However, it has not been able to do so as the issue is merged with the Kashmir problem. The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) part of China's larger Belt and Road initiative (BRI) which passes through GB has added to the confusion of the people of this region. There is a pessimistic positivity about the project, and the people of the region doubt if the China-backed projects can really bring positive change and development in the region. Some section of the media in Pakistan have claimed that China is mainly using the CPEC to reach the markets of Central Asia and Europe.

There is no doubt that GB is an important region strategically and its significance has increased as China is making routes through the region: first, KKH; and now, the CPEC, a flagship project of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. While it is important to enlighten the readers about this region, the role of Pakistan in changing the demography of GB needs a serious introspection and study. Pakistan fiddled with the idea of making it the fifth province for a long time but gave up the idea to avoid protests from the Indian side. It has to be underlined that the people of GB are demanding their democratic rights under the Constitution of Pakistan and believe that Islamabad is partial when it comes to fulfilling

their demands. However, it has not been established yet if the people of GB would like to be a part of India given a chance; this is because minus the anger over their rights the people of the region have strong patriotic sentiments towards Pakistan, which this reviewer can vouch for from her travels to the region in 2017. By simply stating GB to be a constitutional part of India without any empirical evidence to support this claim, the author discredits the feelings of the people of the region.

Readers can expect a few good takeaways from the book. First, as mentioned earlier, it provides a comprehensive historical account of the region pre-independence that will be an eye-opener for those curious about the history of the region. Second, it also extensively explores the shared history of GB with J&K and India. Most importantly, it paints a clear picture of the cultural aspect of the region. But while dealing with the post-independence history of the region, the narrative tends to become disproportionate and lacks clarity and analysis. There is an effort by the author to relate to Pakistan every revolt and protest in the region post 1947, which sounds too hyperbolic.

As a reader, it is not easy to find a good book on GB and when one opens this book, there is an expectation to read a balanced view of how the region changed after KKH and CPEC and how Pakistan is handling the affairs in the region. It is here that the book falls somewhat short. It has a lackadaisical approach to an otherwise very important subject and issue that is under-studied in the realm of international relations.

