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Nosheen Ali

Aga Khan University, nosheen.ali@aku.edu

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Universität Hamburg
Institut für Ethnologie
Edmund-Siemers-Allee 1 (West)
D-20146 Hamburg
Tel.: 040 42838 6208
E-Mail: lfE@uni-hamburg.de
<http://www.ethnologie.uni-hamburg.de>

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Spaces of Nature: Producing Gilgit-Baltistan as the Eco-Body of the Nation

Nosheen Ali

Introduction

A while ago, when I was studying in Grade 8 at an English-medium school in Lahore, our class was divided up in four groups for a Geography project on Pakistan. The group of which I was a part had to make a sculptural map of Pakistan, demonstrating the diverse physical and social qualities of its landscape. And so we had set about carving our country with materials like styro-foam, cotton, cloth, and cardboard. In the final map that we made, the region of Gilgit-Baltistan - then the “Northern Areas” – had remained unlabeled and unpeopled, marked only with mountains made of clay.

Even today, nature remains the primary modality through which Gilgit-Baltistan is understood within the Pakistani national imagination. Its magnificent peaks and breathtaking valleys invoke within Pakistanis a simultaneous sense of emotional attachment and proud ownership, permitting them to claim Pakistan as “beautiful”. In this article, I elaborate how the aesthetics of nature constitute a key terrain for state power in Pakistan. Gilgit-Baltistan is integral to the way in which the spatial structure, geographical essence, and physical-ecological constitution of the Pakistani nation/state is imagined, and as such, the region helps to consolidate a sense of the national self through the definition of the natural self. If maps produce the geo-body of the nation (Winichakul 1997), then representational practices surrounding the ecology of particular regions serve to constitute what I call the *eco-body* of the nation, converting natural splendor into territorial essence and epitome. I have retained the region’s previous name of “Northern Areas” in this article, as the analysis was undertaken prior to the name change in 2009.

Unimagined Communities in Naturalized Landscapes

The Northern Areas - and now Gilgit-Baltistan - occupy a central place in the geographical imagination of the Pakistani nation/state. While I question the ways of seeing which normalize particular landscapes as beautiful and others not, I do not wish to deny the picturesque qualities of the landscape of the Northern Areas per se. Rather, my concern is with exploring how a mode of inclusion based on spatial appeal has come to embody and produce a number of exclusionary effects.

The first book that I examine is titled “Pakistan Studies: Class X” (Rizvi et al. 2003).¹ It is a tenth-grade textbook designed for government schools in the province of Punjab, which is the most populous province of Pakistan. I have not conducted a detailed investigation of official textbooks on Pakistan Studies used in provinces other than Punjab, but a brief overview of them has given me a sense that they treat the region of the Northern Areas in ways similar to the Punjab one that I now proceed to analyze.

The Northern Areas are conspicuous in the text by their very absence. In the entire book, there is not even a single mention of the word “Northern Areas”. At one point, the text does state that the Karakoram Highway “links northern areas of Pakistan with China” (p. 139). However, due to the lack of capitalization, one gets a sense that it is “areas in the north of Pakistan” that are being referred to, not the specific region called Northern Areas which in fact contains the bulk of the Karakoram Highway. While the regional identity of the Northern Areas is unacknowledged, locations within the region are frequently referenced and included as part of Pakistan. For example, a chapter titled “The Natural Resources of Pakistan” mentions that marble is available in “Gilgat”, and that the Pakistan International Airlines (P.I.A.) passenger and cargo services are available in “Gilgat” and “Skardu”. Gilgit – which is consistently misspelt as “Gilgat” – and Skardu are the main towns of the Northern Areas, located in the districts of Gilgit and Skardu respectively. A chapter called the “The Land of Pakistan” more explicitly refers to the Northern Areas. It has a section on the “Physical Features” of Pakistan, which in fact, begins with a description of the “Northern Mountain Ranges”. The part of these ranges that falls within Pakistan primarily lies in the Northern Areas, but this fact is not acknowledged, though specific valleys of the region like Gilgit and Hunza are mentioned. The Himalayan, Karakoram and Hindu Kush mountains that comprise these ranges are each described at length in separate sub-sections, and mention details such as:

“... between Karakoram mountains and Himalayas the valleys of Gilgat and Hunza are situated. The mountain peaks surrounding these areas are covered with snow throughout the year. When the summer season sets in these valleys are full of life. The people are busy in different activities. The hill torrents flow with great force and the green grass grows everywhere.”
(pp. 87-88)

The region of the Northern Areas is thus romanticized as a scenic landscape, significant to the nation merely for its beautiful mountains and lush valleys. The abstract “people” of the region appear not as living, cultural beings but almost as physical features of the land to lend an aspect of reality to the picture. We do not get any sense of the social identities of these people, as they

¹ “Pakistan Studies” is a compulsory subject in schools and colleges in Pakistan.

remain absent from the whole book – even from the chapter called “The People of Pakistan and their Culture”. Of course, one can justifiably argue that government textbooks in Pakistan are generally of a very poor quality, and embody a ridiculously simplistic depiction of Pakistan. However, while all the regions of Pakistan are likely to be portrayed in selective and distorting ways, I would argue that the representations of Northern Areas are particularly invisibilizing. Moreover, they deserve attention precisely because they shape how a strategic territory is geographically and culturally mis-imagined by its school-going population. It is also important to note that the official textbook construction of the Northern Areas discussed above is not limited to one particular text. The region is similarly represented in a variety of other nation-making sites, such as in newspaper and television media, and even in unofficial sites like private school textbooks and popular/academic publications. In a sense then, there is a persistent discursive structure that characterizes the production of the Northern Areas within depictions of the Pakistani nation-state. However, this discourse is not produced in the same manner in every text and context. There are certain regularly occurring tropes, but each recurrence may also produce its own forms of inclusions and exclusions.

“Introduction to Pakistan Studies” is a book written by Muhammad Ikram Rabbani (2003), and is primarily used by 9th-11th grade private school students in Pakistan who follow the British O-level examination system.² This 420-page book is one of the most comprehensive texts on “Pakistan Studies” that I have come across, and also one which gives the most detailed attention to the Northern Areas. However, this emphasis is ridden with ambiguities and contradictions. The Northern Areas are not included in the “Area and Location” of Pakistan, which is the first section of a chapter titled “Geography of Pakistan” (p. 165). This is understandable, as the Northern Areas are not constitutionally part of Pakistan. On the very same page, however, there is a section called “Neighbouring Countries and Borders” which mentions Pakistan’s common border with China along “its Gilgit Agency and Baltistan”. The Gilgit Agency was a colonial political unit which ceased to exist in 1972 when it was merged with surrounding territories (including Baltistan) to form the Northern Areas. Hence, while the region of the Northern Areas itself is not included in the definition of the territory of Pakistan, older names of the Northern Areas or locations within it, are nevertheless incorporated into the state’s territory in descriptions of the border areas of Pakistan. Likewise, while the Northern Areas remain absent from the extensive, written discussion of “Political Divisions” that is provided in the text, they are vividly present on a map titled “Pakistan: Political Divisions” (p. 183).

Similar to the official textbook discussed earlier, the major presence of the Northern Areas in this independently written textbook appears in the section on “Physiography”. This section begins with a discussion of Pakistan’s

2 This system is managed by the Universities of London and Cambridge, U.K.

“Northern Mountains”, and talks at length about the peaks, valleys, glaciers and passes that mark the region. Unlike the previous text, however, this text recognizes that besides the physical landmarks, the north of Pakistan also comprises a place called the “Northern Areas”. This place is considered so crucial for describing the physical landscape of Pakistan that it is allocated a separate sub-section, which is titled “Importance of the Northern Areas of Pakistan (F.A.N.A.)”. It begins with a basic administrative definition of the Northern Areas:

“The Federally Administered Northern Areas (FANA), include the territories of Gilgit and Baltistan (Ghizer, Gilgit, Diamer, Skardu and Ghanche) situated in the extreme North of Pakistan.” (p. 192)

It is paradoxical that this definition appears in a section on “Physiography”, while the very existence of the Northern Areas remains unacknowledged in the section on the political and administrative divisions of Pakistan. Hence, it is only in the context of the physical description of Pakistan that the region is considered significant enough to be expanded upon. As the text goes on to state:

“The FANA is one of the most beautiful locations in the sub-continent. More than 100 peaks soar over 7000 meters (22, 960 ft.). World’s three famous mountain ranges meet in the Northern Areas. They are Himalayas, the Karakorams and the Hindukush. The whole of Northern area of Pakistan is known as paradise for mountaineers, climbers, trekkers and hikers.” (pp. 192-193)

It is this tourist-adventurist gaze which defines the “importance” of the Northern Areas, and now, Gilgit-Baltistan. The text also goes on to mention how the region’s rivers and glaciers serve as vital sources of water. There is no mention of the region’s relationship to Kashmir – not even in separate, detailed sections on “Kashmir” that appear elsewhere in the same textbook. And this is also true for the government textbook discussed earlier. In the private school textbook, at least the nature-related glorification is specifically linked to the “Northern Areas” which is not the case for the government textbook. However, even this recognition is short-lived: while the section titled “Importance of Northern Areas (FANA)” recognizes the Northern Areas as a specific, bounded, administrative region of Pakistan, the very next section called “Valleys of the Northern Areas” displaces this unique regional identity. In this section, the valleys of the Northern Areas include those that lie in the place Northern Areas – like Gilgit, Hunza, Yasin, Ishkoman and Skardu – as well as other valleys such as Swat and Kaghan which lie in the North-West Frontier Province. This textual manifestation of the confusion between the Northern Areas and the NWFP can be linked to the geographically-related,

mystifying names of these regions, as well as the common context of “natural beauty” in which both these places are often invoked.

The tendency of claiming and acclaiming the landscape of the Northern Areas while at the same time reducing its regional identity to an ambiguous or non-existent place is also prevalent in popular and academic discourse. An example of this is provided in a prominent Oxford University Press volume called “Pakistan” (Husain 1997) which was published in 1997 to mark the 50th anniversary of the creation of Pakistan. This book is written for popular consumption, and features contributions from leading national and international scholars who work on Pakistani politics, culture, and history. Images of the Northern Areas are abundantly present throughout the book. In fact, even the cover page of the book displays an image from the Northern Areas – that of the magnificent Deosai peaks, as viewed from the Skardu district of the Northern Areas. Moreover, the book has a section on “The Land and the People” which begins with a fairly detailed discussion of the beautiful mountains and valleys of the Northern Areas. Yet again, these landmarks appear to be located directly in Pakistan rather than in a specific region called the Northern Areas. Moreover, while other regions of Pakistan – mainly the four provinces of Punjab, Sindh, North-West Frontier, and Balochistan – are expanded in separate sub-sections, no such section is assigned to the Northern Areas. Instead, the region is defined in the section on “The North-West Frontier”. This is also the section in which pictures from the Northern Areas are prominently included. Hence, this text becomes yet another site where the conflation of the Northern Areas and the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) is reproduced. It needs to be noted that the book does have a separate section for “Jammu and Kashmir”, but the “Northern Areas” do not appear in this section. There is a reference to the fact that “Dardistan and Baltistan”³ historically formed the north of Jammu and Kashmir State (p. 143), but in the rest of the section’s text as well as in the images that accompany it, one gets the sense that “Pakistani” Kashmir exclusively refers to Azad Kashmir. Here, as in the two texts that I discussed earlier, the delinking of the Northern Areas from Kashmir exists alongside, and in fact, is produced through the romanticized landscaping of the region within Pakistan. Such depictions silence the fact that the political status of the Northern Areas is inextricably linked to the disputed territory of Kashmir, and thus, marginalize the region within discourses of Kashmir.

One might argue that the majority of people within Gilgit-Baltistan themselves do not prefer to be associated with Kashmir, and that they fought a war against Maharaja Hari Singh precisely to rid themselves of Kashmiri rule. However, as political activists in the region repeatedly emphasize, the issue is not whether Northern Areas/Gilgit-Baltistan is part of Kashmir, but

3 Dardistan and Baltistan are historical names of regions that today form part of Gilgit-Baltistan.

rather that the region remains internationally considered as part of the dispute of Kashmir and its political status within Pakistan remains inextricably tied to the “Kashmir issue”. Hence, it is important that their region and its predicament receive attention in the discourse on Pakistan as well as on Kashmir. Neither holds true in the school texts and popular books on Pakistan analyzed above.

The region of the Northern Areas/Gilgit-Baltistan also remains predominantly absent from depictions of the “people” and “culture” of Pakistan as well as of Kashmir. For example, in the edited volume just discussed, the socioeconomic and cultural profile of Pakistan is provided on the basis of specific regions. The cultural imagining of a Pakistani national and citizen is thus associated with the regional entities to which they belong i.e. the regions of Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan and Kashmir which are seen as the constitutive units of Pakistan. Hence, the Punjabi lives in Punjab, the Sindhi lives in Sindh, the Balochi in Balochistan, the Pakhtun in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and the Kashmiri in Kashmir. Even if acknowledged, other linguistic and ethnic groups that reside in these territorial units seem to get overshadowed in this homogenizing one people-one place configuration. In the case of Northern Areas/Gilgit-Baltistan, such a configuration is made difficult because no group can be constructed as the dominant one. The cultural landscape of the region — with its diversity of people like the Shina, the Burushaski, the Wakhi, and the Balti — cannot fit into the ethnic matrix of a nationalist discourse in which places are assumed to map onto a particular social identity. To be sure, there is mention of the “longevity and tranquility” of Hunzakuts (p. 93) and the “ancient Greek ancestry” (p. 142) of Baltis, but even these scarce, often essentializing references are not related to the place called the “Northern Areas” and thus, do not convey that Baltis and Hunzakuts live in the Northern Areas. The region is effectively reduced to an unpeopled landscape, inhabited only with peaks and valleys. This produces a double exclusion: the communities of the Northern Areas remain largely unimagined within the nationalist imaginings of Pakistan and Kashmir, and simultaneously, their subjection is also obscured from the nation’s view.

This landscape-only, no-people no-region depiction of the Northern Areas is linked to the ambiguity surrounding the political status of the region, as well as its contested and dominated status which necessitates the erasure of its identity in nationalist discourse. At the same time, it is important to note that the practice of effacing people from depictions of a scenic Kashmiri “wilderness” was prevalent even in Mughal times, and continued in the colonial period particularly through the writings of European travelers (Rai 2004). This practice is not even limited to Kashmir, and extends to the depiction of mountain territories in general which have always remained barred from the realm of “culture” and “civilization”. Even a historian like Braudel claims: “The mountains are as a rule a world apart from civilizations, which

are an urban and lowland achievement. Their history is to have none” (Braudel 1972: 34). This outside-history depiction of mountains often accompanies a picture of timeless isolation and inertia, as evident in the following representation of the Northern Areas in an academic text:

“Over many thousands of years the economy and the society of Northern Areas had changed but little. The lives and work of its people had remained isolated from the modernization of the Indus Valley. Rulers from the plains — including the British and the Chinese from across the mountains — had come and gone, but material conditions were relatively unaltered.” (Ispahani 1989: 185)

Such representations of mountain societies as history-less, timeless, isolated and backward are typical and symbolic of the lowland perspective from which historical and social analysis is often written (Stellrecht 1997). Particularly in the context of the Northern Areas, this perspective runs counter to local histories of caravan trade, travel, religious conversions, and political and military struggles that have shaped the trajectory of the region as well as that of the British Empire in India. For example, rulers of Hunza and other states that today constitute the Northern Areas/Gilgit-Baltistan were key players in the Great Game. They frequently maneuvered the British, Russian, and Chinese authorities against each other, making their territory as one “where three empires met” and one that was central to the security and stability of the British Empire (Hussain 2003).

The global NGO discourse of environmental conservation tends to see spaces as nature zones instead of lived homes, and is thus a new form of the lowland perspective which has become dominant in the thinking about the Northern Areas/Gilgit-Baltistan in recent years – one that further entrenches the region as eco-body in material practice. Elsewhere, I have demonstrated how this eco-body is spatially configured through specific conservation projects such as national parks and community-based trophy hunting programs, which have served to re-inscribe the power of state and capital over local communities and ecologies (Ali 2009). The perception and implication of such discursive practices is captured well by the following comment from Raja Hussain Khan Maqpoon, a journalist from the region:

“It is ironic that the world is more worried about the falling trees; they are sad that our white leopards are vanishing day by day; the dead bodies of our Markhor frightens them; they are going all out to preserve our ecosystem. But nobody ever thinks of the people of this land.” (Mehkri 2000)

Hence, what is often common to the lowland nationalist discourse on Gilgit-Baltistan as well as the NGO-led conservation discourse on the region is the valorization of nature and a simultaneous devaluing of people.

Conclusion

The aim of this article is not to argue against a felt attachment to nature and a place-based sense of belonging. Indeed, a real connection to specific parts of the Earth and the natural world is sorely needed to counteract the managerial discourses of environmentalism that have come to dominate today (Kingsnorth 2012). Yet, we must be equally wary of the essentialist ways in which claims about regional landscapes become implicated in nationalist narratives of identity and erasure. In the textual and visual vocabulary of Pakistani nationalism, Gilgit-Baltistan has been primarily constructed as a space of nature, ecology, and beauty, thus making it into what I call the eco-body of the nation. Such constructions reduce the region to a physical and geographical territory, and effectively serve to depoliticize it. While Gilgit-Baltistan is externally produced as an idyllic tourist destination for the urban Pakistani and global trekker, it is internally managed as a suspect security zone. Moreover, the ecological nationalism through which the region is imagined has served to erase the region's political subjection and social struggles from public vision. As scholars and citizens concerned for the predicament of the region, we must remain cognizant of the nationalist narrative of nature-glorification, and continually struggle to visibilize the political contestations that this narrative serves to silence.

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Dr. Nosheen Ali received her PhD in Development Sociology from Cornell University. Her research focuses on political issues in Gilgit-Baltistan, including sectarianism, militarization and conflicts about environment conservation. Currently she is Program Director, Social Development and Policy, and Assistant Professor at the School of Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences of Habib University in Karachi.