



# International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal homepage: [www.ijrpr.com](http://www.ijrpr.com) ISSN 2582-7421

## Exploring Cultural Diversity in Gilgit-Baltistan: A Multifaceted Analysis

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### ABSTRACT :

Gilgit-Baltistan is a northern region of the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir that signed the Instrument of Accession on October 26, 1947 and became a part of Indian dominion. The annexation of Gilgit-Baltistan by Pakistan was executed through coercive measures amid their military actions against Jammu and Kashmir during the period of 1947-1948. As of 2017, covering an area of around 70,000 square kilometers, it has a population of nearly 1.5 million and is home to numerous ethnic groups, cultures and languages. This region is a hybrid of languages, customs and ethnic groups as a result of centuries of interaction and trade along the ancient Silk road. Indigenous groups such as the Balti, Shina, Burusho and Wakhi all contribute to this vibrant ethnic environment by upholding their unique traditions and ceremonies. The peaceful co-existence of Islam, Buddhism and Ismailism further enhances the religious diversity of the region. The present paper will provide a detailed analysis of the multifaceted dimensions of the Gilgit-Baltistan's cultural diversity. The paper will also examine the region's historical foundations, indigenous populations, language diversity, religious co-existence and customs.

Keywords: Gilgit-Baltistan, Cultural Diversity, Religious Plurality, Indigenous Communities.

### Introduction

One of the most spectacular and beautiful places on earth is the Gilgit-Baltistan region of India's former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. It is at the intersection of the Middle East, South Asia and Central Asia and has currently been illegally occupied by Pakistan since 1947. This area is strategically situated and borders Afghanistan, Pakistan and China. Most of the area is mountainous and is surrounded by Himalayas in the South and the Hindu Kush and Karakoram in the North. Having a diverse climate that varies from North to South and East to West, however in certain respects, the summer months are warm in the western and southern parts while the most of the year is bitterly cold in the eastern and northern sections. Both the areas are abundant in natural resources, including a multitude of mineral reserves and substantial hydroelectric potential traversed by the Indus river.



Fig. 1 (Source: Internet)

From an administrative perspective, Gilgit-Baltistan is divided into three main divisions: Gilgit, Baltistan and Diamer which are further divided into fourteen districts (The Express Tribune, 2012).



Fig. 2 (Source: Internet)

### Historical Roots of Cultural Diversity within the Region

The present day Gilgit-Baltistan vicinity was formerly not a single political entity (Shah, 2021). Earlier, Gilgit, also known as "Dardistan", and Baltistan, often called "Little Tibet" in medieval literature, developed as separate governmental entities. Both Gilgit and Baltistan have awesome topographies, histories, customs, and religious ideals (Chandrashekhar, 2017). The population are multilingual, numerous in phrases of sociocultural and ethnic backgrounds, and make a concerted attempt to maintain their precise customs. Together with its long history of migration, invasion, and change, Gilgit-Baltistan's strategic vicinity at the meeting factor of Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East has traditionally contributed to the location's cultural variety. For ages, this location has been an important hub for migration, exchange, and conquests, promoting the sharing of products, thoughts, and cultural customs. The main source of cultural plurality is a rich ancient legacy that turned into advanced with the aid of centuries of interaction and exchange alongside the old Silk Road and this legacy encourages trade and the dissemination of cultures among civilizations. A significant effect on the area's religious landscape and cultural ethos turned into also delivered approximately with the aid of the introduction of Buddhism. The following Islamic conquests and the enlargement of Islam similarly varied Gilgit-Baltistan's non secular landscape, permitting Sunni, Shia, and Ismaili traditions to coexist peacefully.

### Ethnic Diversity

There are many different indigenous communities in Gilgit-Baltistan, which adds to the region's unique cultural diversity. With their own social structures, languages, and customs, the Balti, Shina, Burusho, and Wakhi are the most notable communities in this region.

- **Balti:** One of the largest and important ethnic category in Gilgit-Baltistan is the Balti community, which are mainly living within the Baltistan vicinity. They are of Tibetan descent, speak Balti language, and are famous for their intricate woodcarvings and colourful cultural celebrations.
- **Shina:** The Shina people are native to the Gilgit and Diamer areas of Gilgit-Baltistan and speak the Shina dialect which belongs to the Dardic language grouping. Their cultural expression is heavily stimulated via music and folklore, which are part of their rich oral tradition.
- **Burusho:** The Hunza valley of Gilgit-Baltistan, which is famous for its terraced agriculture, apricot orchards, and breathtaking views, is domestic to the Burusho people, who speak the Burushaski tongue.
- **Wakhi:** The Wakhi community broadly speaking live inside the higher Hunza Valley and portions of China, Tajikistan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

In addition to these communities, the region is home to Yashkunsm, Ladakhis, Turks, Pathans, and Moghals. Due to the opening of more than one routes to Gilgit-Baltistan and the globalization of mountain areas, the place has experienced an increase in cultural diversity. It is domestic to immigrants from multi-ethnicities, along with Punjabis, Kashmiris, Gujjars, Kohistanis, Pashtuns, and Hazaras (Butt & Abbas, 2014).

### Linguistic Diversity

Gilgit-Baltistan's diverse linguistic environment is characterized by way of a massive quantity of languages and dialects that represent the place's complicated ethnic makeup and records. The majority of people inside the location communicate Urdu, that's the lingua franca of Gilgit-Baltistan. The educated classes and those employed in the tourism sector speak English as a common language.

- **Shina:** The most common language in Gilgit is Shina, which is spoken in areas like Astore, Ghizer, and Diamer. Additionally, it is spoken in Baltistan to the east, as well as in the Ishkoman valley, Hunza, and Nagar to the north.
- **Balti:** The majority of people in Baltistan speak Balti, and there are Balti-speaking groups in Skardu, Rondu, Shigar, Khaplu, Kharmang, Gultari, and Ganche.
- **Burushaski:** The main language of the Hunza Valley is Burushaski, which is spoken by people on both banks of the river: the northern bank (Hunza) and the southern bank (Nagar). Burushaski is still not a written language, even though it is widely used.
- **Khovar:** The most common language used in Chitral is Khovar. Because of their marriage ties, Khovar speakers are also present in Yasin and some Gilgitian households.
- **Wakhi:** The upper Hunza river and the Ishkoman valley are home to Wakhi speakers. It is categorized as belonging to the Pamirian branch of Iranian languages.
- **Domaaki:** The Domas of Gilgit and several Shina-speaking villages in the lower Hunza valley speak a language called Domaaki. The Domas are mainly recognized for their work as smiths and musicians.

Furthermore, a tiny percentage of people speak Kashmiri, Punjabi, and Pashto.

## Religious Diversity

With Islam, Buddhism, and Ismailism coexisting peacefully for centuries, Gilgit-Baltistan is known for its religious diversity. Religious sites of all kinds, including monasteries, mosques, and shrines, are prevalent throughout the region and serve as significant places of worship for people of diverse religions. Approximately 75% of the people in the area are Muslims, who are further subdivided into four groups: Shia, Sunni, Noorbakhshi, and Ismailis. 41 percent of the region's population is Shia, 30 percent is Sunni, 24 percent is Ismaili, and 6 percent is Noorbakhshi (Mishra, 2019).

- In Gilgit Baltistan, the Shias are the dominant sect and form the majority in the districts of Gilgit, Skardu, and Granche.
- With the majority of adherents in the Diamer District, Sunnis make up the second-largest community in Gilgit Baltistan. The Districts of Astore, Ghizer, Gilgit, and Skardu are also home to them.
- The Ismailis are the majority community in the Ghizer District and in various sub division of Hunza.
- The majority of the Noorbakhshi Community lives in Granche and Skardu. This sect, which is part of the Sufi order of Islam, is important to the region's spiritual and cultural life.

There are various cultures, ethnic groupings, languages, and backgrounds in Gilgit Baltistan (Holden, 2019). The primary cultural occasions inside the area fall into one of the following categorization:

**Festivals and Celebrations:** Festivals can be extensively classified into two categories: religious and cultural. Eid-ul Fitir, Eid Milad-un-Nabi, and Eid-e-Ghadir are examples of some religious holidays. Navroz (Persian New Year), Jashn-e-Baharan, the Shandoor Polo Festival, the Silk Route Festival, and the Harvest Festival are examples of cultural events.

**Dance:** Common dances at festivals, traditional events, and ceremonies consist the Old Man Dance, which is performed by men wearing the traditional dresses; the Sword Dance, which entails participants holding a sword and a shield in one hand while feigning a fight with a partner; and the Cow Boy Dance (Payaloo), which involves dancing with a stick in hand while wearing an old styled attire and long leather shoes.

**Music:** The following types of music are prevalent in the area:

- Alghani: It is a rhythm used to commemorate joyous occasions.
- Ajoli: The bride and groom leave the house to the rhythm of ajoli.
- Souse: A fast-paced martial rhythm with a specific application in sword dances.
- Dani: Hunza's traditional music, which connects it to Tibet, Baltistan, and Siberia.

## Conclusion

As a result of its unique topography, history, and the blending of local ethnic groups, Gilgit-Baltistan is a thriving patchwork of cultural diversity. Along with its numerous religious traditions, vibrant festivals, and vast range of languages and gastronomic options, the region exemplifies the spirit of coexistence and enjoyment of its many cultural features. In spite of its diversity, the area fosters a sense of oneness by demonstrating the tenacity of its people and the peaceful blending of cultures.

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