

Pakistan's First Climate Prisoners: Baba Jan and Affectees of the Attabad Disaster

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Baba Jan and his comrades, Pakistan's first climate prisoners, have led the charge for climate justice, ecological protection, and self-determination for over a decade

A Decade Jailed: Unforgotten Heroes of Gilgit-Baltistan

Baba Jan has spent years of his life in prison, framed along with Iftikhar Karbalayi and 10 others, for terrorism and the murder of a young man and his father. Eyewitnesses say that Afzal and Sher Ullah Baig were shot and killed by police while demonstrating for unpaid compensation promised to victims of the landslide and floods that destroyed villages in the Gojal Valley in January 2010.

This is the story of a climate apartheid in the making, as rapidly transforming material realities intensify long-standing struggles for survival, justice, and democracy. The Attabad disaster and ongoing denial of justice to Baba Jan and his comrades, and the right to self-determination for the people of Gilgit-Baltistan (GB), only point to further upheavals as material conditions continue to unravel under the global pandemic, economic fallout, and climate crisis.

Annihilating Communities, Crushing Dissent

As the mountain crumbled and cascaded into the valley, blocking the Hunza River, the landslide created a new lake in the Gojal Valley, drowning several villages. Nearly a decade later, these villages remain hundreds of feet below the surface of what is now the 'Attabad Lake' (or 'Gojal Lake').

While rebuilding the Karakoram Highway and restoring the flow of commodities across the nearby Chinese border was prioritized by the government, the people of the Gojal Valley were denied the support they needed to rebuild their lives. They were subjected to police terror when forced to take to the streets to draw attention to their grievances, causing the loss of two precious lives from their community.

“...the government refused to prioritize efforts to open a spillway in the wreckage of the obstructed river and provide compensation funds to the thousands of affected families.”

The huge landslide in the Himalayas took out the hamlet of Sarat and drowned the villages of Attabad and Ayeenabad as well as significant portions of the communities of Shishkat, Gulmit, Hussaini, and Ghulkin. As the landslide tore across the valley, damming the Hunza River and inundating 12 miles of the Karakoram Highway, dozens of residents were killed and thousands rendered homeless. Access to food, medicine, and markets to sell agricultural products was cut off for 25,000 upstream residents of the Gojal and Hunza Valleys for months, while [over 100,000 people remained affected for over a year](#). During this time, residents were forced to rely on an unsafe and expensive ferry to cross the lake. Although the Highway was summarily repaired and the new lake quickly turned into a popular tourist destination, the government refused to prioritize efforts to open

a spillway in the wreckage of the obstructed river and provide compensation funds to the thousands of affected families.

Baba Jan and other allies stood with the people of Gojal Valley, demanding that the government provide compensation to the families of the Attabad Lake disaster before funneling money into reconstruction of the Highway. It is not that the local people were opposed to rebuilding the Karakoram—indeed, the highway is considered essential infrastructure which facilitates access for those in remote areas to critical supplies and services. They wanted the road repaired, just not while people were forced to wait years for much-needed government support.

As tends to be the case in times of catastrophe, the people came together, and with support from Baba Jan and other political workers in Hunza Valley, began to rebuild their lives. Yet, the intersection of the climate crisis and anti-democratic norms in Gilgit-Baltistan has proved to be especially deadly.

The political arrangement of GB is rooted in the fact that it is considered by Pakistan to be part of greater Kashmir and an unresolved territorial conflict with India. After independence from the British in 1947 and Partition of the subcontinent, the United Nations resolution of 1949 mandated that Kashmiris were to determine whether to be annexed by Pakistan or India through a free, fair, and impartial plebiscite. Though both countries agreed, the vote never took place.

Following subsequent conflicts over the contested border, GB, along with the area known as 'Azad Kashmir' became federally administered territories of Pakistan in the northernmost part of the country. In 2009, Pakistan's cabinet passed the GB Empowerment and Self-Governance Order, nominally granting self-rule to GB residents by forming a locally-elected GB Legislative Assembly and Council. Yet, these reforms failed to grant local people the full rights of citizenship, including the right to elect the prime minister and representatives to the national legislature.

Thus, GB remains under a state of exception, governed by indirect rule paving the way for arbitrary policies of state officials appointed from Islamabad. In practice, this deprives the people of GB from having a say over much of their local affairs, including on the spending of taxes collected in the region. And when they seek recourse for grievances, they tend to be ignored or worse.

When the victims of the Attabad disaster finally received [compensation checks from the government, which bounced](#), according to Baba Jan's lawyer, community members attempted to get the attention of then Chief Minister of GB, Syed Mehdi Shah. They blocked the re-opened Karakoram Highway as he was travelling on 11th August, 2011. But rather than stopping to meet the constituents who had then been requesting government assistance for nearly two years, police were directed to open fire at the peaceful demonstrators, killing Mr. Baig and his son, Afzal.

As news of the murders and police brutality spread, protests erupted in several towns across the region. Palpable anger over abandonment and aggression by the state manifested as riots, including the torching of a police station and government building.

“[T]he anti-terrorism regime created by the ATA...is being employed by the police and law enforcement as a means to subvert the fundamental rights during arrest, investigation and trial of non-terrorism suspects...”

In the weeks that followed, Baba Jan and eleven others were arrested, tortured and charged under the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA)—the Anti-Terrorism Courts granted them no legal defense and sentenced them to life in prison. “[T]he anti-terrorism regime created by the ATA”, according to Justice Project Pakistan, “is being employed by the police and law enforcement as a [means to](#)

[subvert the fundamental rights during arrest, investigation and trial of non-terrorism suspects](#), as opposed to effectively countering terrorist offences in Pakistan". Baba Jan and his comrades, along with the situation in GB, have become test cases for managing the intersection between environmental crisis and political authoritarianism.

Shocks, Abandonment and Authoritarianism: Resisting Lifelessness

This dark saga reveals how life is treated as expendable in places like GB, where democratic decision-making has always been denied and lives considered secondary to the imperative of keeping business flowing. While Baba Jan is popularly known today as one of Pakistan's first climate prisoners, he and his comrades have a long history of struggle for the rights of the people of GB.

Baba Jan joined the Pakistan Youth Front as a passionate organizer in the early 2000s. The group fought for education, job opportunities and rights for the people of the region, especially in the context of a growing youth bulge denied educational and work opportunities, access to essential 21st century infrastructure (including clinics and hospitals, universities, and digital technology) and the right to self-determination and control over local resources and land.

Climate Impacts and Political Consequences

The lack of political and economic control is worsened when climactic events wreak havoc on land and natural resources, as the Attabad Lake disaster exemplifies. After the landslide, GB was deprived of swift environmental and economic recovery while its people lacked the political power to challenge the negligence of the authorities.

While the Gojal Valley is in a seismically active zone, there was no seismic activity recorded near Attabad preceding this particular landslide event. The mountains surrounding the valley are home to some of Pakistan's largest glaciers, which are melting at an accelerated rate due to both the climate crisis as well as black soot coating the glaciers from polluting industries and transport in the region. As the glaciers melt, they can create new glacial lakes, and increasingly frequent and devastating glacial lake outburst floods (GLOFs) when dams of ice or debris burst under pressure or melt away from the heat. According to a 2011 study by David Petley on the rockslide that led to the formation of Attabad Lake, the source materials of the landslide "included substantial amounts of...glacial deposits".

Another factor impacting landslides is deforestation, underway for several years in parts of GB, which erodes the mountain landscape, making it susceptible to collapse when destabilized for various reasons. Clear-cutting forests often precedes mineral extraction and development projects, which themselves weaken landscapes through demolition for roads and infrastructure. It is impossible to determine the extent to which these factors contributed to the landslide that inundated the Gojal Valley. However, given that glacial melt, deforestation, and polluting/extractivist projects are strongly linked to the climate crisis and are known to cause landslides and flood events, the Attabad disaster is widely accepted as a climate-induced event, and Baba Jan and his comrades as Pakistan's first 'Climate Prisoners'.

Recurrent ecological breakdowns that scientists have warned about for decades are the inevitable outcome of relentlessly pursuing the neoliberal agenda at the expense of communities and planetary systems. In recent years, regions and ecosystems across Pakistan have particularly borne the brunt of global climate disaster. The ever-increasing global emission of greenhouse gases to power the economy is causing heatwaves that have killed thousands of people across Sindh and Balochistan. These processes have also awakened decades-old locust eggs due to unprecedented desert floods, leading to waves of locust swarms destroying crops across the region

As rising global temperatures have [caused a quarter of Himalayan glaciers to melt away over the last 40 year](#), destabilizing surrounding landscapes and inundating valleys, there is no denying the fact that those who are least responsible for sowing the seeds of ecological chaos are the ones who are most vulnerable to its deadly impacts.

In GB, where anti-terrorism courts are hampering Baba Jan's fight for justice, the repressive state machinery intersects with the pernicious discourse around the US-sponsored "War on Terror", deployed routinely against those who breach the boundaries of political speech and action. Similar instances in the US and Brazil, for example, involve indigenous and marginalized people fighting polluting projects and fossil fuel infrastructure in their communities who are met with brute force, criminalized and even branded as "eco-terrorists".

Communities increasingly displaced due to development projects or the ecological and climatic fallout of 'development' find themselves fighting for their lives against unsafe conditions, diminished access to stable environments, and aggressive security forces controlling entire regions.

No Going Back

In the face of increasing state failure, authoritarianism and environmental breakdown, Baba Jan's commitment to justice and democracy has made him a symbol of the refusal to accept abandonment of entire peoples to starvation, homelessness and death. While he and his comrades suffer in jail even under a global pandemic, Baba Jan is not the forgotten name of a lost battle. Rather, his struggle represents the living possibility of a future worthy of the sacrifice.

In 2015, Baba Jan contested elections for the GB legislature from prison as a candidate of the Awami Workers Party. On one side, there were multiple candidates of the ruling class; on the other, a prisoner charged with terrorism and isolated from his people in the lonely dungeons of an authoritarian state. Even Baba Jan's closest supporters deemed the electoral mismatch a merely symbolic opportunity to popularize the cause of the jailed leader.

But what ensued in the campaign was nothing less than phenomenal. Hundreds of GB youth returned to the valley from all across Pakistan to volunteer for him. Ordinary people collected donations to run a people's campaign. Songs and poems were written for Baba Jan that became extremely popular. Baba Jan's defiance hit a raw nerve and captured the collective sense of hurt, anger, and rebellion felt by large sections of society. His absence from the electoral campaign weighed heavier than the combined presence of all the other candidates and their state backers.

Baba Jan's sister, Nazneen Sheen, led the campaign with immense courage and mobilized the public. It began to look like Baba Jan could realize the impossible by defeating the region's ruling oligarchy. However, the ruling party intervened, pushing a campaign of intimidation and bribery with state resources to win back votes. In the end, Baba Jan came in second place, defeating a number of established candidates. His dramatic electoral performance shook the state apparatus, which moved quickly to disqualify him from participating in subsequent elections through a judicial order, including upcoming GB Legislative Assembly this year.

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Despite suffering numerous health complications, the long prison sentence has failed to diminish Baba Jan's spirit or resolve. His politics not only reiterates a call for justice for the Attabad Lake disaster affectees, but is also part of the overarching struggle for self-determination, which GB has long been denied. His resoluteness has earned him the title of "The Mountain of the Himalayas," an

apt tribute to a brave soul who has willingly sacrificed for the cause, the people, and the region he dearly loves.

Baba Jan's lifelong struggle has always been against land and resource grabs, displacement of people and destruction of communities for the profit of foreign interests, and the handful of local and national elites dominating GB in the name of the national interest. Baba Jan is a figure symbolizing the reclamation of resources and self-determination by the people, and the struggle for the promise of a better tomorrow.

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