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# Outrageous state, sectarianized citizens: Deconstructing the ‘Textbook Controversy’ in the Northern Areas, Pakistan

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# *Outrageous State, Sectarianized Citizens: Deconstructing the 'Textbook Controversy' in the Northern Areas, Pakistan*

Nosheen Ali

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## Introduction

- <sup>1</sup> In May 2000, the Shia Muslims<sup>1</sup> based in the Gilgit district of the Northern Areas began to agitate against the recently changed curriculum of government schools in the region. The controversial textbooks spanned various disciplines such as Islamiyat,<sup>2</sup> Urdu, and Social Studies, and were produced by the Punjab Textbook Board. The Islamiyat texts for primary classes were deemed particularly unacceptable. Many in the Shia community felt that in these new books—written by a panel of four Sunni scholars—not only was the Shia interpretation of Islam blatantly disregarded, but the Sunni interpretation was also more starkly asserted. For example, it was argued that visual representations of performing prayers followed the Sunni style of prayer, implicitly delegitimizing the Shia way of being Muslim. Similarly, it was felt that the lives of Caliphs as well as the Prophet's Companions were extensively discussed, while those of the revered Shia Imams were barely mentioned. Such representations were deemed to undermine the faith and identity of Shia youth. Four years after the agitation began, the 'textbook controversy'—as it came to be called—turned into a fatal conflict involving violent confrontations between state authorities and Shia protestors, a climate of heightened Shia-Sunni discord, and a constant curfew that paralyzed daily life in the region for eleven months. The matter was partly resolved in April 2005, when an agreement was reached to withdraw some of the

controversial textbooks, and replace them with those produced by the National Book Foundation and the NWFP Textbook Board.<sup>3</sup>

- 2 Why and how did the issue of textbooks become so huge and consequential? It generated the collective mobilization and protest of the Shia community against the state for five years, and at the same time, intensified Shia-Sunni sectarian hostility in Gilgit. As such, it encompassed much more than what the term controversy might suggest. In this paper, I attempt to contextualize the Shia outrage against government textbooks in the Northern Areas, and explore the larger stakes that were implicated in their struggle.
- 3 The central argument that I seek to make in this paper is that the politics of sectarianism in the Northern Areas must be understood in relation to the regulatory processes of state-making. In the analyses of sectarianism in Pakistan, the state is understood largely as an instrumentalist policy-maker, and its role limited to considerations of law, the control and proliferation of *madrasas*, and party politics (Malik 1996, Zaman 1998, Nasr 2002). My study, on the other hand, draws upon theories of state-formation that posit the state as an assemblage of contested discourses and micro-practices of discipline and power (Mitchell 1991, Steinmetz 1999, Trouillot 2001). Such discursive practices embody 'politically organized subjection' (Abrams 1988) and 'moral regulation' (Corrigan & Sayer 1985) through which the social identities of citizen-subjects are cultivated and state rule accomplished.
- 4 Textbook representation constitutes a key micro-practice of regulation, as it is a principal site where the imagined identity of the nation-state as well as its citizens is articulated. Indeed, textbooks not only serve to naturalize particular understandings of the 'nation', but also reinforce existing social inequalities such as those of class, rural/urban location, gender, ethnicity, and religion (Apple & Christian-Smith 1991, Pigg 1992, Starrett 1998, Saigol 2000). My focus, in this paper, is on the normalization of religious identity in Pakistani school textbooks. In official curricula in Pakistan, the idealized and authorized Pakistani citizen is assumed to be the Sunni Muslim, while other ways of being Muslim are silenced. The Shia movement against textbooks challenged this silence, raising fundamental issues pertaining to religion, nation, and citizenship in Pakistan: what a Pakistani is, or should be, what a true Muslim is, or should be, and how religious communities struggle to redefine the very terms of national citizenship. But the movement is not just about textbooks. It reached such explosive proportions because biased textbook content was viewed as part of a long-standing sectarian-political project of state-making in the Northern Areas—one that has repeatedly spurred sectarian resentments not only for thwarting religious difference but also for disrupting regional political solidarity.
- 5 Apart from investigating the politics of sectarianized state textbooks, my paper further problematizes the role of the state in relation to sectarian identity by interrogating practices through which the state represents 'minorities', labels political tensions, and implements conflict-management. These provide additional means through which meaningful citizenship is denied to otherized religious groups. Ironically, even when the latter try to confront exclusionary state policies—as the Shia communities in Gilgit have attempted—the end-result can often be an undermining of their rights, and a reproduction of state power.

## Context

- 6 The silencing of Shia beliefs in textbook depictions of Islam is common throughout Pakistan, in the curricula of public as well as private schools. If such representations are a routine matter all over Pakistan, why is it that they become particularly problematic and contested only in the Northern Areas? The answer lies in its demographic constitution: around 75% of the region's population follows some form of Shia Islam (Rieck 1997), almost an exact reversal of the norm in the rest of Pakistan.<sup>4</sup> This makes the Northern Areas the only Shia-majority political unit in Sunni-dominated Pakistan. For a state that officially proclaims Islam as its *raison d'être*—Islam that is implicitly coded as Sunni – the Shia-majority Northern Areas thus constitute a significant source of anxiety.
- 7 This religious anxiety is intensified by a geo-political apprehension: the region of the Northern Areas is a disputed border territory, comprising around 86% of Pakistan-administered Kashmir.<sup>5</sup> As such, it is central to Pakistan's national security and territorial sovereignty. It is ironic that at the heart of Kashmir—which Pakistan claims on the basis of its 'Muslim' identity—lies the region of the Northern Areas which contradicts this very identity by being home to a different kind of Muslim than that endorsed by Pakistani nationalism (Ali 2005). The fear of this different Muslim, and of losing the strategic territory that s/he inhabits to India, to a broader Kashmiri struggle, or to local nationalist movements, has driven the Pakistan state to establish authoritarian control in the Northern Areas. It was as part of this project of control that the independent princely kingdoms of the region were abolished during 1972-1974, and replaced by a single administrative territory cryptically called the 'Northern Areas'.<sup>6</sup> This new entity was neither given an autonomous status like that of Azad Kashmir, nor a provincial one which has been granted to other regions of Pakistan. Instead, it was placed under the direct rule of the non-local, unelected Federal Minister of Kashmir Affairs and Northern Areas. The constitutional status of the region continues to remain ambiguous, and its people remain deprived of even the most fundamental constitutional rights such as the right to vote, to have representation in Parliament, and to appeal in a higher court.<sup>7</sup> In the words of one resident of the Northern Areas, the exceptional political marginality of the region makes it a 'Kashmir within Kashmir'.<sup>8</sup>

## Events

- 8 By 2004, it had been four years since the Shia community in the Northern Areas started agitating against the controversial curriculum. Delegations had repeatedly appealed to the Ministry of Education as well as the Ministry of Kashmir and Northern Areas Affairs in Islamabad, only to be dismissed each time (Stöber 2007). Discouraged and angered, Shia students began to boycott classes and stage rallies, and more than 300 of them went on a three-day hunger strike in Gilgit on 17<sup>th</sup> May 2004.<sup>9</sup> Within days, the situation gravely deteriorated as thousands took to the streets, blocking roads and bringing businesses to a halt.<sup>10</sup> When the prominent Shia leader, Agha Ziauddin Rizvi, declared 3<sup>rd</sup> June as a day of protest if the government failed to resolve the syllabus issue by then, the army was called in and a curfew imposed in Gilgit town. However, street processions continued in defiance of the curfew, leading to violent clashes between the protestors and security personnel in several parts of the Northern Areas.

- 9 In the following months, the situation kept worsening as the curfew continued and caused severe food shortages and transport problems, schools remained closed, and government services and businesses virtually shut down. An atmosphere of extreme sectarian discord and violence engulfed the region, as the conflict between the Pakistan state and local Shia communities over the controversial syllabus spiraled into a sectarian one that pitted local Shia and Sunni communities against each other. For many belonging to the Shia and Ismaili communities, even quotidian activities like traveling in the bus became fraught with danger as busses started to get attacked and passengers—deemed to be non-Sunni based on information about name and home address on national I.D. cards—were singled out and killed. The conflict intensified even more when on 8<sup>th</sup> January 2005, Agha Ziauddin Rizvi—the imam of the central Shia mosque in Gilgit and the most vocal opponent of the controversial syllabus—was gunned down. Even as it was widely believed that the killing was an act of government intelligence agencies to discipline the Shia community, it nevertheless generated another wave of Shia-Sunni sectarian strife in the Northern Areas. More than a 100 people lost their lives in the long-drawn conflict resulting from the 'textbook controversy' (S. Abbas 2005). Things returned to a relative calm only in April 2005, after leaders from both sects came to a peace agreement through a *jirga*, and the government agreed to withdraw two key textbooks that had spawned the 'controversy'.
- 10 Deep sectarian fissures, however, have taken root in the region as a result of the 'textbook controversy', heightening divides that previous state policies had already been generating (Ahmed 2005). For example, a foreboding trend towards sect-specific, 'secular' schools has emerged, reducing opportunities for socialization and friendship between the youth of different sects. Relations have been tense even among students from different Muslim communities who study in the same educational institution. As in other conflict situations, women in the Northern Areas have become particularly vulnerable because their bodies are constructed as embodiments of community honor, and become sites for enacting and reproducing community identity. Thus, for instance, when schools and colleges re-opened in 2005 after remaining closed for a whole year, Shia girls in some colleges started taking a black *chaadar* (long scarf). This was a marker of Shia identity<sup>11</sup>, but was also practiced so that in the event of a conflict, Shia women could be singled out for protection by being distinguishable from others wearing the white college uniform. A teacher from the F.G. College for Women, Gilgit, who pointed this out to me, noted the absurdity of a protective measure that would render women more visible for attack, and the sadness of a logic that construes some women as more worthy of protection in situations of conflict. She also commented on how disconcerting it was for her to see an educational space being visually and physically divided into black and white, and how this stark dichotomy symbolized the general deterioration of inter-sect relations in the region.

## Questioning the texts

- 11 The textbook movement was spearheaded by the late Agha Ziauddin Rizvi, who was the imam of the central Shia mosque in Gilgit, and the principal leader of the Shia community in the Northern Areas. Agha Ziauddin seemed to be a popular leader for the Shias, many of whom stood by him in his call for a change in the textbooks irrespective of whether they understood or cared about the curriculum issue. Even those who disagreed with his

stance on the textbooks nevertheless respected him for the sense of integrity with which he dealt with the government. He was often described to me as one who 'could not be bought' and who 'did not fawn on the Chief Secretary'.

- 12 Agha Ziauddin and other proponents of the textbook movements firstly argued that Sunni beliefs and values were deeply embedded across the various disciplines that are taught in government schools. They called for the implementation of a consensus curriculum, which would be representative of and acceptable to all sects, and teach respect for all faiths. Further, they demanded that in the absence of such a curriculum, the Islamiat curriculum should be optional for Shia students in the Northern Areas.
- 13 The specific objections to the curriculum were detailed in a document published by the Islah-e-Nisab (Correction of Curriculum) Committee, Northern Areas, under the aegis of the Markazi Imamia Jam-e-Masjid (Central Shia Mosque), Gilgit. In this document, the textbooks used for teaching Urdu, Islamiat, and Social Studies in classes 1 all the way through B.A. have been meticulously analyzed, and their silencing or negation of Shia beliefs and practice identified (Islah-e-Nisab Committee Shumali Ilaqajaat 2003). Most of the objections relate to differences in the interpretation of Islamic history, and in the performance of Islamic ritual. As a case in point, consider an objection to a page from *Meri Kitab* (My Book), a text used by class 1 students in the Northern Areas:

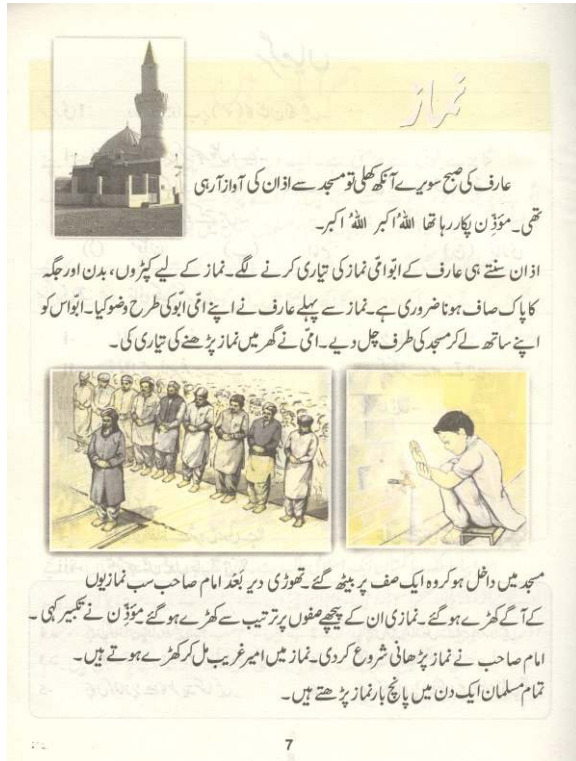


Figure 1. Page from *Meri Kitab* (My Book), Class 1, Punjab Textbook Board, Lahore

- 14 According to the Islah-e-Nisab Committee, the above content is problematic because its visual depiction of the performance of *namaz* (prayer) privileges the Sunni interpretation of Islam. In Shia practice, hands are typically held loosely on the side during *namaz*, not clasped in front as shown in the image. This example was also considered problematic by several Shia respondents whom I interacted with during my fieldwork, who argued that such images routinely confuse young Shia children who are learning a different practice at home, and thus have the potential to make them *gumrah* (astray).



- 15 Another representation, considered one-sided by the Islah-e-Nisab Committee, is a page from the official 7<sup>th</sup> grade textbook for 'Art and Drawing' which is reproduced below:



Figure 2. Page from Art and Drawing, Class 7, Punjab Textbook Board, Lahore

- 16 The above page contains an exercise that directs students to imitate—in sketch and color—a calligraphic text illustrating the names of the four Caliphs: Abu Bakr, Umar, Usman, and Ali. This is in line with Sunni belief which regards Ali as the fourth caliph; Shia doctrine, on the other hand, disputes the authenticity of the caliphate system, and reveres the imamat system in which Ali is the first Imam instead of the fourth Caliph. In the textbook, this exercise appears right after two other exercises that instruct students to calligraphically reproduce the word 'Allah' and 'Mohammad' respectively. The exercise is particularly significant in the context of the 'textbook controversy', as in September 2001, a 7<sup>th</sup> grade Shia kid was reportedly kicked out from a school in Gilgit for tearing this exercise from his book (Islah-e-Nisab Committee 2003). This was the first of several incidents that prompted Shia students to boycott their classes, and mobilized the Shia community in general against the curriculum.
- 17 The exercise is both striking and disturbing, as firstly, it demonstrates how an already pervasive presence of religious content in supposedly secular textbooks in Pakistan extends even to the realm of drawing. Second, the exercise is accompanied by an intriguing instruction that can be translated in English as: 'If you wish, you can also sketch the names of other revered personalities apart from the ones depicted here'. This might be read as a subtle form of recognizing and permitting sectarian difference, but it is a limited one: the page neither has an example for calligraphically reproducing the names of other Muslim personalities, nor space for a sketch that students might wish to create on their own. Importantly, the wording of the Urdu instruction is such that the option to illustrate different names can be availed only after the normalized names have been copied in accordance with Sunni tradition.



- 18 The above exercise was also specifically pointed out to me during an interview that I conducted with a Shia religious figure in Gilgit, Haider Shah. Shah was deeply involved in the textbook movement, and continues to play a prominent role in the activities of the central Shia mosque in Gilgit. He argued:

First of all, what is the point of putting religion in an art book? Don't we have enough of it already in the Urdu, English, Islamiyat, Social Studies (...) basically all other books? Yes, calligraphy has an important place in Islamic history, so if desired, one could have an exercise about painting 'Allah' or 'Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahim' (In the name of Allah, the Most Beneficent, the Merciful). But why should our kids have to paint something that contradicts their religious beliefs? I am not saying that we should have a separate exercise for Shia children, which calligraphically shows the Twelve Imams. We should not have any content that represents the beliefs of a particular sect. The voice that we raised was not against one picture; it was against the one-sided representation of Islam in the entire curriculum, from class 1 till Bachelors. The curriculum has become so poisonous, fussing over rituals and losing sight of ethics. You see the main problem is that *maulvis* are writing the curriculum instead of scholars. The *maulvis* get their say because they have managed to portray and dismiss scholars as Westernized and secular. But why should the government buy into their agenda? This surely has to change.

- 19 Haider Shah's comments came as an unsettling surprise to me, as I had grown to perceive the textbook movement predominantly in terms of the assertion of a Shia 'religious' identity, instead of the 'secular' demand—and a broader progressive vision—that it evidently embodied. I realized that my own unconscious prejudice—stemming partly from the violence of a liberal-secular epistemic lens that we tend to internalize under modernity—had led me to believe that a struggle about religious representation which was actively promoted by the clergy would be devoid of secular ground and legitimacy. I was all the more struck that this secular perspective was communicated to me by a devout Shia closely involved in running the affairs of the mosque, and that the perspective emerged from within his understanding of religion. Ultimately, the entire encounter made me realize the profound unhelpfulness of 'religious' and 'secular' as categories of analysis and as descriptors of social reality.
- 20 It is more useful, then, to pay close attention to the terms used by the participants of the textbook movement themselves. In my interviews as well as in documentary sources, the demand for a consensus curriculum was articulated as an *insaani* (human), *aaini* (constitutional), and Islamic right that is due to Shias as citizens of Pakistan (Islah-e-Nisab Committee 2003, Markazi Shia Tulba Action Committee 2004). The demand was further underpinned by a nationalist impulse, proposing that a consensus curriculum was necessary for achieving Muslim (Shia-Sunni) unity in order to ensure peace, justice, and development in Pakistan. Simultaneously, it was emphasized that people who have helped to create Pakistan and have continued to defend it have come from all sects, and hence they all deserve recognition in the official school curricula.
- 21 The Sunni community of Gilgit, on the other hand, by and large opposed the textbook movement. A teacher, Faraz Malik, objected to the tactics of the movement:
- Shia kids were often pressurized into boycotting their classes. I think that Shia elders are poisoning the minds of young kids with their propaganda.
- 22 Hajra Jabeen, a college student, was concerned about the consequences of the movement for the region:

Look where we are now. There were open killings in Gilgit because of the textbook issue. Rangers have set up their chowki (checkpoint) at every corner, and even if the situation is more normal now, we feel scared if Rangers were to leave.

- 23 Yet another respondent, Gul Azam, questioned the very rationale of the movement:

How can we change the curriculum and remove references to Hazrat Umar? Why do Shias hate Umar? The whole Pakistan follows this curriculum. We are Pakistani and we should not try to be different.

- 24 This comment indirectly renders the movement as anti-national, reflecting a perception that was common amongst the Sunni inhabitants of Gilgit. It is presumed that there is neither any reason nor room for religious difference within a Pakistani nation that is implicitly conceived as homogenous. The mention of hating Umar also shows that the movement was perceived as anti-Sunni.
- 25 The Shia participants took pains to dismiss the allegation that the movement was anti-Sunni and anti-Pakistan. They argued that their efforts were directed towards the freedom of religious belief which has been promised to every citizen in the constitution. However, they felt that the movement was given an anti-Sunni color by the local administration and intelligence agencies, to mislead the Sunni community and create a sectarian rift between Sunnis and Shias in the Northern Areas.

## State-formation and the production of sectarian difference

- 26 Representations of Islam such as those discussed above are fundamental to the project of Pakistani state-formation, as they provide a chief mechanism through which Islam is constructed as the ideological basis of the nation, and the legitimating source for the state. Through these representations, the Pakistani state is naturalized as a space that is inhabited—barring a few small groups of non-Islamic minorities—by a homogenous national community organically united by the force of Islam. Textbook Islam is thus routinely constituted as a singular belief system, with no sectarian differences. While it is often claimed that this Islam emphasizes the commonalities of the various schools of thought in Islam, in actuality, it is mostly the tenets of Sunni Islam—adhered to by around 75% of the Muslim population in Pakistan<sup>12</sup>—which has come to be legitimized as 'correct' Islam in textbook representations as well as in classroom teaching. Indeed, a particular kind of Sunni Muslim is created and privileged in textbook Islam in Pakistan. While there are many ways of being Sunni and generally of being Muslim, the textbooks emphasize a narrow and bigoted interpretation that reduces Islam to excessive ritualism, and openly demonizes other religions (Saigol 1994, Jalal 1995)...<sup>13</sup> As such, these representations can be seen as constituting forms of 'politically organized subjection' (Abrams 1988) and 'moral regulation' (Corrigan & Sayer 1985) through which the social identities of subjects are homogenized for the making of state and citizen in Pakistan.
- 27 Processes through which states strive to create such national homogeneity constrain the possibilities of self-ascription, fluidity and change, and simultaneously end up giving 'socio-political significance to the fact of difference' (Verdery 1994: 46). This means that difference is raised from 'the realm of doxa, the assumed, into the realm of notice, where disputes can occur between the orthodox and the heterodox, the normal and the strange – that is, between the values associated with what are now *recognized* as significantly different options...but were not previously seen to be so' (Verdery 1994: 46). Verdery

makes this argument for understanding how ethnic identity and difference become noticeable, meaningful and consequential because of the disciplinary practices of the modern state, and I would argue that a similar dynamic is at work in the context of religious identity and difference in the Northern Areas in Pakistan. At the same time, though, how and when differences come to matter and produce conflict depends on the particular historical context in and through which state forms develop.

- 28 Sectarian 'difference' in the Northern Areas did not always have the meaning and consequence that it carries today. In the Gilgit district of the Northern Areas, the time before the 1970s is remembered as a time of shared life-worlds, when religious identities were fluid and pluralistic. Though inter-sect skirmishes are acknowledged, people by and large respected and even participated in each other's religious rituals, and inter-marriage across sects was fairly common, with the result that several families in the Northern Areas today have members who belong to different sects. Such practices defy essentialist understandings of 'sectarian difference' which presume that sectarian identity is inherently exclusionary and antagonistic, and that differences between sects naturally lead to conflict. Surely, theology itself fosters a sense of incommensurable values (Shaikh 1989) which can and has created conflicts between people with different religious beliefs. However, we need to examine the conditions and processes—local, national and global—through which a sense of difference is produced, and the potential for conflict heightened and realized.<sup>14</sup> I will briefly outline some of these processes that have enabled the production of sectarian difference in the specific context of the Northern Areas.
- 29 While I cannot undertake a detailed examination here, I would like to highlight that both the national project of Islamization implemented by General Zia (Weiss 1986) as well as the international mobilization of political Islam for the Cold War (Mamdani 2004, H. Abbas 2005) bears significant responsibility for the rise of sectarian conflict in Pakistan (Abou Zahab 2002), and hence, also in the Northern Areas. However, state policy specific to the region must also be investigated to understand the local context of sectarianism.
- 30 A strong sense of religious difference has emerged and become politically significant precisely since the formal integration of the Northern Areas into the Pakistan state, between 1972 and 1974. This integration was effected partly in response to growing secular-nationalist voices in Gilgit, which challenged the authoritarian rule of the military-bureaucratic establishment in the Northern Areas, and demanded equal citizenship. By abolishing the system of princely kingdoms, the Pakistan state was able to pacify the local populace, but meeting their demands for political representation and fundamental rights was deemed unthinkable in the larger context of the Kashmir dispute (Ali 2005). Thereafter, state institutions—chiefly the army, intelligence agencies, and the KANA<sup>15</sup> bureaucracy—embarked upon a divide-and-conquer project<sup>16</sup> that aimed at creating disunity along sectarian lines, in order to thwart regional solidarity and secular-nationalist aspirations.
- 31 This divide-and-conquer policy firstly entailed state sponsorship of Sunni and Shia religious organizations, which were required to spur sectarian animosity as a means to deflect political energy and agreement (Shehzad 2003, personal interviews). *Maulvis* from both sects were paid by intelligence agencies to engage in dehumanizing tirades against sectarian others, through wall-chalking, mosque loudspeakers, and publications. While each sect was played against the other—primarily the Sunni against the Shia and vice versa—the Sunni sect was more patronized as the Shia identity has been rendered antithetical in a gradually Sunni-ized Pakistan state (Qureshi 1989).

- 32 This was accompanied by a targeted suppression of the Shia community in the Northern Areas. One of the first acts that represented this suppression was the banning of the traditional Muharram procession in 1974 in Gilgit, which generated a major sectarian clash in this Shia-majority region. In popular memory and discourse, this is the period that is routinely identified with the beginning of 'sectarian conflict' (Sökefeld 2003). The year 1988, moreover, is pointed out as a turning-point in a systematic anti-Shia campaign, when well-equipped Sunni *lashkaris* (militants)—mostly from the North-West Frontier Province—were brought into the Northern Areas with the support of the Zia government to orchestrate 'sectarian' riots (Rieck 1995, Aase 1999). At least 12 Shia-dominated villages were brutally attacked—bodies were burnt, *imambargas* (Shia mosques) torched, crops destroyed, and even animals were slaughtered. Shia-dominant villages such as Jalalabad, Bonji, and Jaglot were completely ruined, while Shia civilians in several other areas fled from their villages to seek protection. The official death toll was put at 200, but unofficial accounts estimate the number of deaths at 700 (Shehzad 2003, Ahmed 2005, Abbas 2006). No official inquiry about this violence has yet been undertaken, and many Shia leaders still demand accountability and compensation for the losses that the community sustained in 1988.
- 33 Such grievances are compounded by other frustrations over economic and political discrimination. The higher posts within the local bureaucracy in Gilgit, for example, have tended to be dominated by non-local down-country officials belonging to the Sunni sect. When a Shia District Commissioner was appointed for the first time in 1994, local Sunnis created a huge furor. This, in the words of an interviewee, rankled even the non-practicing Shia because it demonstrated how bureaucratic positions of power had become an assumed Sunni privilege.
- 34 As indicated earlier, practices of religious regulation also constitute key strategies for regional subordination, as they help to keep the strategic border territory of the Northern Areas divided along sectarian lines—a division that serves to disrupt the formation of regional unity and avert challenges to the coercive regime that has been put in place in the region since 1947. Political subjection and religious subjection are thus intimately linked in the Northern Areas, together helping to maintain territorial control over the region.
- 35 This link is commonly understood as well as articulated by people in Gilgit. Irrespective of their sectarian affiliation, many locals perceive modes of inscribing Shia marginality—particularly since the 1988 riots—as part of a 'divide and conquer' state project, in which religion has become both a rationale for regional subordination as well as a tool for accomplishing it—the rationale being the threat of a Shia-majority province, and the tool being the perpetuation of religious sectarianism through various mechanisms.
- 36 Such historically shaped perceptions about the state affect the meanings that people give to any new state policy, as well as the consequences that these policies produce. This was amply demonstrated in the context of the 'textbook controversy'. While it has been suggested and can be reasonably believed that at least part of the stronger Sunni orientation of the textbooks comes from the domination of the Punjab Textbook Board by members of the Jamaat-e-Islami, or others who profess a Sunni sensibility (Shehzad 2003), many Shia protestors as well as local journalists felt that 'divide and conquer' was the key project behind the change in curriculum. How far that is true, I do not know. But it is important to note that because of historical experiences, people perceive it as such. The fact that the textbook issue did in fact end up intensifying sectarian conflict in the region

made people believe all the more in an assumed intention of the state to politically suppress the region by religiously dividing it. Furthermore, the logic of 'divide and conquer' as an explanation for sectarian conflict in the Northern Areas is significant because—like the memories of inter-sect harmony and acceptance—it serves to challenge arguments that explain 'sectarianism' as a natural outcome of religious differences.

- 37 The link between sectarian differences and regional politics was centered in the demands of the Shia protestors as well. When the issues of the controversial textbooks emerged, many local Shias argued that there would not have been any problem with textbooks, if, like other regions of Pakistan, the Northern Areas too had a separate textbook board to author its own curriculum.<sup>17</sup> If such a body existed, the local populace could have ensured that textbook representations of Islam were not biased, but rather, reflective of the different Muslim practices that are prevalent in the region. This perspective meant that the Shia protests against the controversial textbooks had the potential of being transformed into a cross-community political demand for the creation of a separate textbook board, hence becoming a vehicle for the assertion of regional identity and sovereignty. Such a platform for local unity and citizenship would pose a major threat to the Pakistan state, and the fear of this possibility was perhaps one of the key reasons that led the government to crack down severely on the movement against textbooks. Even before the government crackdown, however, such a platform could not materialize – partly because the Shia demand for a separate religious curriculum was simply unacceptable to the Sunni community, but also because many locals felt that a separate curriculum for Northern Areas Shias would create more divisions in an already polarized environment. Indeed, the demand for a separate curriculum was opposed within the Shia community itself, as I elaborate in the next section.

## Debates and dilemmas of cultural reproduction

- 38 Like any other community, the 'Shia community' in the Northern Areas is not a homogenous group in which all the Shias were uniformly offended by the new curriculum, and unanimously opposed it. While grievances against Shia representation in textbooks were widely shared, many within the local Shia community—particularly older members and veteran leaders—felt that collective action calling for a replacement of the curriculum was unwise and unnecessary. At least three discernible reasons for this stance emerged during personal interviews with some of these Gilgit-based leaders.
- 39 First, it was felt that the negative impact of discriminatory textbook representations on Shias dwarfs in comparison to the widespread violence against the Shia community that has escalated all over Pakistan in recent years. As one leader, Jamal Zaidi put it:
- In Karachi, our doctors, engineers, and military officers are being targeted, while ordinary people continue to die in attacks on our mosques. As a minority that is facing such a systematic campaign, we need to pick our issues wisely.
- 40 According to an interviewee, several Shia leaders elsewhere in Pakistan also shared this perspective, and hence disagreed with Agha Zia on his decision to contest the textbooks.
- 41 Second, the extent of danger posed by Sunni-biased representations in textbook Islam is itself considered debatable. As a prominent leader Abbas Hussain commented:
- We have always been learning Sunni thought in secular schools, but we have never lost our faith. Our faith is taught to us at home, and no one can take it away. So why should we be scared of textbooks?<sup>18</sup>

- 42 Third, as Abbas Hussain further pointed out, there was a successful struggle for gaining Shia representation in textbooks elsewhere in Pakistan but far from benefiting Shia youth, it proved to be immensely detrimental:

In President Ayub Khan's time (1960s), our people raised their voice. A Shia Mutalibat Committee (SMC) was formed and because of its efforts, a separate curriculum for Shias was eventually introduced in Prime Minister Zulfikar Bhutto's time in the 1970s. But the person who was grading the Shia section of the Islamiyat syllabus remained Sunni, so Shias were easily singled out for discrimination. In the exam that one has to take to join the Civil Service, Shia youth particularly suffered as the rate of failure increased. And so, access to government jobs decreased. It was at this point that Punjabi Shia youth told the Tehrik-e-Jafaria Pakistan<sup>19</sup>: we are suffering because of your policies. So finally, Shias themselves got rid of the separate curriculum that they had worked so hard to introduce.

- 43 This historical experience highlights the paradoxical dilemma in which religious minorities often find themselves when they get political and cultural recognition at the state level—affirmation of their identity and difference is accompanied with a heightened visibility that renders them more vulnerable to forms of discrimination. Particularly in the context of an oppressive and puritanical state, religious minorities therefore feel that it is much safer to keep a 'low profile'—a policy that often translates into internalized modes of suppressing religious identity and practice in the public sphere. The discourse of 'keeping a low profile' is particularly prevalent amongst the Ismaili-Muslim community in the Northern Areas, which time and again has found itself caught between the Shia-Sunni conflict. However, for the Shia community in the Northern Areas, the situation is different. They might be a minority from the perspective of a Sunni-majoritarian Pakistani state but numerically, they comprise a sizeable majority of the population in the Northern Areas. In such a context, the desire, legitimacy, and possibility of the recognition of Shia religious identity take on a different salience.

## Citizenship versus sectarianism: Competing representations of struggle

- 44 The demand for equal representation in textbook discussions of Islam can be seen as a religious right, which Shias in Gilgit claim for the simple reason that they too are Muslims, and that their children deserve to learn about their own faith whenever Islam is taught in public schools. However, as mentioned earlier, the movement participants and supporters simultaneously employed the liberal discourse of citizenship to describe their struggle. They claimed that as citizens of the Pakistani state, it was their *secular*, constitutional right to have 'freedom of religion', and necessary protections as a national minority.<sup>20</sup>
- 45 Recourse to this vocabulary is critical and effective for two reasons. First, it constitutes a creative strategy of making a claim to citizenship rights, in a context where these have been consistently denied even in their most basic forms. In fact, it can be argued that it was precisely the historical marginalization of the region and the repression of secular-nationalist struggles within it, which paved the way for religion to emerge as an idiom of claiming citizenship and sovereignty for the dominant Shias in the region. After all, it is not uncommon for assertions of cultural identity—and difference—to take place in contexts of political and economic marginality.



- 46 Second, the liberal discourse of rights offered a way to counter the official representations of the struggle against the controversial textbooks, in which the demand for the withdrawal of the textbooks was portrayed as part of a subversive 'sectarian agenda' by the Shia populace. Instead, the protesting Shias constantly asserted that the issue was not primarily a Sunni-Shia one, but one that was fundamentally tied to the state-citizen relation.<sup>21</sup> The discourse of constitutionally guaranteed citizenship allowed the Shias to overcome their representation as the 'others' of secular politics, and claim that their agenda was fully in line with the criteria of a modern liberal democracy – in fact, it was the Pakistan state itself which was upholding sectarian biases by privileging Sunni ideology, and promoting authoritarianism by denying legitimate regional rights to the people of the Northern Areas. Hence, the state was portrayed as the culprit because it was abusing its duty of looking after the common good of society, which is constructed as its fundamental purpose in the modern-liberal paradigm.
- 47 In contrast, the dominant way in which the textbook issue was represented in official and media discourses was through the motif of 'sectarianism'.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, in the last five years or so, the sociopolitical landscape of the Northern Areas in general has come to be characterized and explained through the paradigmatic idiom of Shia-Sunni 'sectarian conflict'. This is not to deny that inter-sect discord in multiple forms has indeed become a grave everyday reality in the region. What is problematic, however, is the way in which the depictions of the region as a sectarian mess overshadow the political contestations that underlie most of the cases that are branded as instances of sectarian conflict.
- 48 The representation of state-society political conflict as inter-group religious discord is both a reminder and continuation of colonial strategies of rule. The rhetoric of Hindu-Muslim communalism was routinely employed by the British colonial state in India to reduce particular conflicts that challenged its authority to local 'religious' differences, so that it could absolve itself of responsibility, construct resistances as pathological, and then quell them under the pretext of restoring harmony (Freitag 1990, Mayaram 1997). The vocabulary of religion provides a particularly useful means for deflecting political contestation and reinscribing state paternalism, as it helps to recast legitimate political grievances as primordial, anti-modern demands by emotional, irrational subjects. Such an 'emotionalizing' of political issues is a key strategy of accomplishing state rule.
- 49 In present-day Northern Areas, the discourse of 'sectarian conflict' similarly produces a depoliticizing effect: backward society is in a state of anarchy, stemming from supposedly primordial intra-Islam differences, and the innocent and caring state constantly needs to intervene to create order. If it were not for the state, the region would remain steeped in violence, and as a state official put it, 'the uncompromising attitude of *ulema* of both the sects' would 'destabilize the area'.<sup>23</sup> This was precisely the language used in an official press release by the Northern Areas Home Department to explain the violent clashes and continuous curfews that paralyzed the region in October 2005. The clashes had started after security personnel shot at students who were peacefully protesting against the death of their colleague in custody, but the incident was conveniently represented officially and in the media as one in which law enforcement agencies were dealing appropriately with the 'sectarian elements' afflicting the region.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, the discourse of sectarianism can be and has been instrumentalized by intelligence agents for covering up attacks on anti-government leaders, as these can be conveniently attributed to the workings of some Shia or Sunni fundamentalist outfit depending on the ascribed identity of the leader.



## Minoritizing the subject

- 50 Apart from creating a depoliticized representation of conflicts in the Northern Areas, the discourse of sectarianism also invokes a majority/minority distinction that further misrepresents the political and social realities of the Northern Areas. When one hears of Shia demands in the Northern Areas and conflict due to these demands, the internalized image that is conjured is one of a religious minority trying to scramble for rights and 'creating issues'—it is not usually known that the Shias constitute a sizeable majority in the region. Even if this is known, there is a certain way in which majoritarian politics creates a complacency that undermines the concerns of national minorities. This complacency is *widely spread in society* and not limited to the views and practices of members of religious parties. Hence, the majority/minority distinction itself becomes a key mode of subjection for religious groups like the Shias in Pakistan.
- 51 Let me problematize this distinction more. To begin with, the distinction assumes that homogeneous cultural groups exist which can be neatly parceled into 'majority' and 'minority'. However, culture is a messy, interactive process (Gilroy 1987, Hall 1992) that is necessarily constituted through borrowings across boundaries (Said 1993), and hence cultural identities—whether minority or majority—cannot be construed as pure, unified and fixed. The Northern Areas in particular has a long history of pluralist religious identities, with inter-marriages and shared participation in religious rituals being the norm instead of the exception. Secondly, constructions of majority and minority privilege one particular form of identity in defining and numerically dividing a population, as if the reality of people's multiple social positions and complex subjectivities—stemming from the interacting identities of class, gender, ethnicity, religion, and language amongst others—can be simplistically reduced to a single, determining essence. Most importantly, the majority/minority distinction constitutes a critical discourse through which the hegemonies of particular collectivities are sustained, and their access to the apparatus of the state naturalized. Hegemonic power asserts itself as the legitimate authority by appealing to the logic of 'majority rule'—defined in terms of religious, ethnic, class, and other identities. Simultaneously, by constructing various others as 'minority', it renders them somehow less legitimate, as assumed deviants because they are not 'normal', and hence, justifiably deprived from a recognition of identity, and participation in structures of authority (Anthias & Yuval-Davis 1992). This utility of the majority-minority distinction in maintaining hegemonic power makes it effective for the accomplishment of state rule. Not surprisingly, then, the minority/majority distinction has been deeply embedded in legitimizing discourses of nationalism. In nationalist projects across the world, the 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991) of the nation was frequently constructed as one in which an imagined majority personified the nation, and 'a 'minority' tolerated only insofar as it proved able to accommodate the demands of the fictitious majority represented by the state' (Benbassa & Rodrigue 2000: 105). The distinctiveness of the minority was 'to receive expression only in private, and destined eventually to disappear within the majority' (Benbassa & Rodrigue 2000: 105).
- 52 This disappearance within the majority has not only been achieved through the denial of equal and substantive citizenship to those labeled as 'minorities', but also the denial of their very existence via mechanisms of legal subjugation and physical violence. Such processes of minoritization can be totally disruptive of people's sense of security and

belonging, as has been amply and shamefully demonstrated in the case of Ahmadi repression in Pakistan (Kennedy 1989). However, in some situations, the discourse of a minority status can in fact be appropriated to claim rights and protection. The problem, of course, is that even when so-called minorities achieve their objectives, just treatment is not a guarantee. On the contrary, the granting of their demands can make them even more vulnerable to discrimination, by making them legible to state officials whose ways of thinking remain structured by the majority/minority discourse. My reference here is to my earlier discussion of the ways in which Shias in Pakistan successfully struggled for a separate curriculum, but then themselves organized to abdicate this right as their new visibility became the very source of their educational and economic subjection.

## Conclusion

- 53 Sectarian conflict in Pakistan has risen remarkably in recent years, particularly in the wake of Zia's Islamization program, the Iranian revolution, and the Afghan war, all of which have fueled the creation and sustenance of sectarian hostility and violence (Qureshi 1989, Zaman 1998, Nasr 2002, Abou-Zahab 2004). These processes surely influenced the emergence of Shia-Sunni conflict in the Northern Areas as well. However, a closer study of sectarian conflict in the Northern Areas reveals that here, the issue is fundamentally linked to the religious and geo-political anxieties that this Shia-majority, contested border territory poses for the Pakistan state, as a result of which the state has established particularly harsh regimes of political and religious subjection in the region. Further, analyses of sectarianism in Pakistan have focused heavily on the politics of militant religious parties, but as the case of the Northern Areas demonstrates, we also need to be attentive to the ways in which sectarianism is both propagated and contested in the realm of cultural representations as well. Finally, it has often been argued that sectarianism constitutes a key 'threat' to the Pakistan state, due to which the country remains an 'unachieved nation' (Jaffrelot 2002). Such discourses tend to render the state as a hapless victim with no causal responsibility in the matter, and moreover, risk a reproduction of the standard hegemonic narrative in which the military-dominated state claims to be striving to protect Pakistani society from extremism and sectarianism. The regional context of the Northern Areas, however, illuminates a reverse logic, as the state itself is perceived as a threat to people's identities and sectarian relations in the region. We hence need to focus more on the role of the state, on the content of categories such as the 'state' and 'sectarian identity', and on the ways in which these categories are mutually constituted in a dialectical relation with each other. These categories are historically formed and internally contested, and in fact, always *in the process* of making and negotiation. Instead of assuming them to be unified, already-made and oppositional, we need to investigate how the nation-state is itself formed through the cultivation of particular religious identities, and the ways in which the latter are transformed in the process.
- 54 The 'textbook controversy' in Gilgit offers a useful lens to interrogate how state practices in Pakistan have served to normalize particular religious sensibilities for its citizens. Instead of homogenizing identity by 'managing' difference, these practices have served to aggravate inter-sect differences and conflict in the Northern Areas. Hence, it is not surprising that movements for religious assertion have taken strong root in the region in recent years. For many in the Shia community of the Northern Areas, the movement for a

separate Shia curriculum provided a concrete, verifiable manifestation of the state's sectarian-political agenda, around which the local Shias could mobilize and have more realistic chances of getting their voices heard as compared to mobilization around other demands. The 'controversy' over textbooks was an outlet for, and consequence of a history of political and religious suppression in the Northern Areas that has been vitally responsible for the polarization of sectarian relations in the region. The right to have representation of Shia identity in school textbooks was seen by Shia protestors—particularly by the younger generation—as a mode for securing recognition and cultural reproduction, even as veteran leaders challenged this connection. Moreover, through the idiom of religion, the Shia subjects of the Northern Areas were also articulating a political demand for legitimate, substantive inclusion in a polity that has historically denied them even the most basic citizenship rights—partly on the very grounds of their different religious identity. Hence, asserting religious difference and getting it politically recognized in official arenas such as education becomes a potential, and perhaps the only viable way to achieve similarity and equal treatment as citizens of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

- 55 Towards this end, Shia protestors and sympathizers of the movement against textbooks productively framed their struggle in a religious idiom as well as in liberal-political terms, challenging the sense of contradiction that is usually ascribed to these forms of politics. By drawing attention to the controversial texts and also by securing an agreement with state authorities for withdrawing the texts, the movement participants helped to subvert the universalizing—and dangerous—project of the state to claim and establish a narrow vision of Islam as the basis for a supposedly homogenous national culture. Yet, at the same time, the movement against the textbooks produced a sharp response from the paramilitary and intelligence apparatus of the state as well as local Sunni groups, resulting in a violent conflict that severely disrupted people's lives and livelihoods. This led many across the spectrum to question whether textbooks justified such a confrontation with a repressive regime, and thus alienated them from the cause of the movement. Ironically, then, the movement helped to reproduce state power by intensifying sectarian distrust and conflict in the region, and thus obstructing possibilities of local unity for political empowerment.

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## NOTES

1. The term 'Shia' in this paper refers specifically to the Isna-Ashari (Twelver) Shias.
2. Islamiat is a subject that focuses on the study of Islam. It was declared a compulsory subject for all Muslim students in Pakistan, under General Zia's Islamization program.
3. 'Schools Re-Open Today in Northern Pakistan After One-Year', *Pakistan Times*, 27<sup>th</sup> April 2005. <http://pakistanimes.net/2005/04/27/national1.htm>. I say 'partly' because the controversial texts numbered far more than those that were going to be replaced, and further, the replacement that was agreed in principle has not materialized on the ground in the Northern Areas.
4. In Gilgit town, specifically, the Twelver Shias are perceived to be in majority, alongside a sizeable presence of Sunnis as well as Ismailis.
5. Pakistan controls about 84,159 square kilometers of the former Princely State of Jammu and Kashmir. Azad Kashmir comprises 11,639 square kilometers of this area, while Northern Areas occupy 72,520 square kilometers (Weiss 1994).
6. See Sökefeld (2005) for a discussion of how colonial forms of domination in the Northern Areas have continued in the postcolonial context.
7. In 1994, the one million people of the Northern Areas were finally entitled to elect their own legislative council but its powers were severely limited. Policies on the ground continue to be made primarily by the Ministry of Kashmir Affairs and Northern Areas, as well as the Force Command Northern Areas which is the military headquarters in Gilgit. In 1999, the Supreme Court of Pakistan gave the government six months to extend fundamental constitutional rights as well as legislative and executive powers to the Northern Areas but nothing concrete has materialized yet.
8. Letter to the Editor, *The Friday Times*, 14<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> May 2004.

9. 'Hunger Strike', *Dawn*, 20<sup>th</sup> May 2004.
10. 'Syllabus Protests Paralyse Business and Traffic', *Daily Times*, 1<sup>st</sup> June 2004.
11. Black is a traditionally significant color for Shias, particularly symbolic of the practice of mourning the martyrdom of Hussain, the grandson of Prophet Mohammad.
12. Such figures—whether used to represent Sunnis or Shias—always need to be accompanied with words of caution: information about sects is not collected in the Pakistani census, and hence the figure quoted is a commonly used estimate. The figure is an abstraction of course, as the 'Sunni sect' or 'Shia sect' incorporates diverse and often contradictory religious perspectives. Also, many people would describe themselves as Sunni or Shia in a broad cultural and social manner, without adhering to particular religious beliefs and practices.
13. The Islamic content of textbooks in Pakistan has recently become somewhat of a national controversy, militantly defended in the discourse of religious parties and deeply opposed in widely publicized scholarly research that has elaborated the ways in which curricula across Pakistan propagate religious intolerance and violence (Nayyar & Salim 2003). Curiously, this scholarly attention has not focused adequately on how internal differences within Islam—particularly between the Shia and Sunni interpretations – are represented in official textbooks, which is ironic since it is precisely this aspect of textbooks that has been most prominently contested in Pakistani history, and recently become the source of violent conflict in the Northern Areas.
14. Simultaneously, we need to be attentive to the lived realities of overlapping identities, co-existence, and co-operation through which the potential of conflict is constantly undermined.
15. KANA stands for the Ministry of Kashmir Affairs and Northern Areas; it is the federal institution that directly administers the Northern Areas.
16. The language of 'divide and conquer' is not my own reading of the situation; this English term was widely used by my research subjects to describe the Pakistan state's approach towards the Northern Areas.
17. It is worth noting that even Azad Kashmir has a separate textbook board.
18. It is important to note that people in the region have not always been learning Islam—Sunni or otherwise—in public schools. The system of modern schooling in the Northern Areas was introduced by the British in 1893. Till 1947, there was no designated subject for religious studies. People were accustomed to sending their kids to neighborhood preachers, or educated children in their homes. It was only when Islam became a compulsory subject in postcolonial Pakistan that the issue of Shia kids learning Sunni Islam emerged. The issue became particularly marked during the Zia years, when Islamic studies became significantly more Sunni-ized, and its emphasis shifted from ethics to rituals e.g. on issues such as the correct way to perform *wuzzu* (ablution).
19. Founded in 1979, TJP is the foremost Shia political party in Pakistan.
20. Interestingly, these protections were first put into the Pakistani constitution precisely because of Shia mobilization for rights and representation (Rieck 2000).
21. Even in the so-called sectarian riots that had engulfed the region in June 2004, the buildings that were burnt were prominent government buildings, not Shia or Sunni mosques as would be the case in many other parts of Pakistan.
22. Whether portrayed merely as a matter of sectarianism or not, it is important to note that the political situation in the Northern Areas has generally received dismal coverage in the national press. Moreover, local journalists whose voices do manage to make it to the national press have been severely harassed by government officials for their reporting of the region.
23. 'Eight Religious Leaders Held', *Dawn*, 16<sup>th</sup> October 2005.
24. This is not to deny that the Sunni and Shia clergy has indeed inflamed the sectarian situation in the Northern Areas on several occasions. Rather, my point is that several recent cases of 'sectarian conflict' in the Northern Areas cannot be simplistically reduced to the rhetoric of the



parochial, conflict-prone sectarian elements. Moreover, it is important to recognize that state policies themselves have indirectly or directly contributed to the power of the clergy in the Northern Areas, and elsewhere in Pakistan.

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## ABSTRACTS

This paper examines the 'textbook controversy' (2000-2005) that arose when the Pakistan state introduced new, overtly Sunni textbooks in the Northern Areas, and the local Shia population began to agitate for a more balanced curriculum. The conflict reached an acute stage during 2004-2005, as violent confrontations took place between Shia and Sunni communities, and a constant curfew paralyzed daily life in Gilgit for eleven months. I argue that the Shia mobilization against textbook Islam was not just a form of "sectarian" outrage; rather, it symbolized a broader political claim to inclusion in a context of long-standing regional subordination and religious suppression. The politics of sectarian emotions in the Northern Areas must therefore be understood in relation to the regulatory processes of state-making, which are the very source and embodiment of 'sectarianism' and 'outrage' in the region.

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