

# Visualising disaster : Gojal after the Attabad landslide in Northern Pakistan

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Tsantsa : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Ethnologischen Gesellschaft = revue de la Société suisse d'ethnologie = rivista della Società svizzera d'etnologia**

Band (Jahr): **17 (2012)**

PDF erstellt am: **21.06.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1007294>

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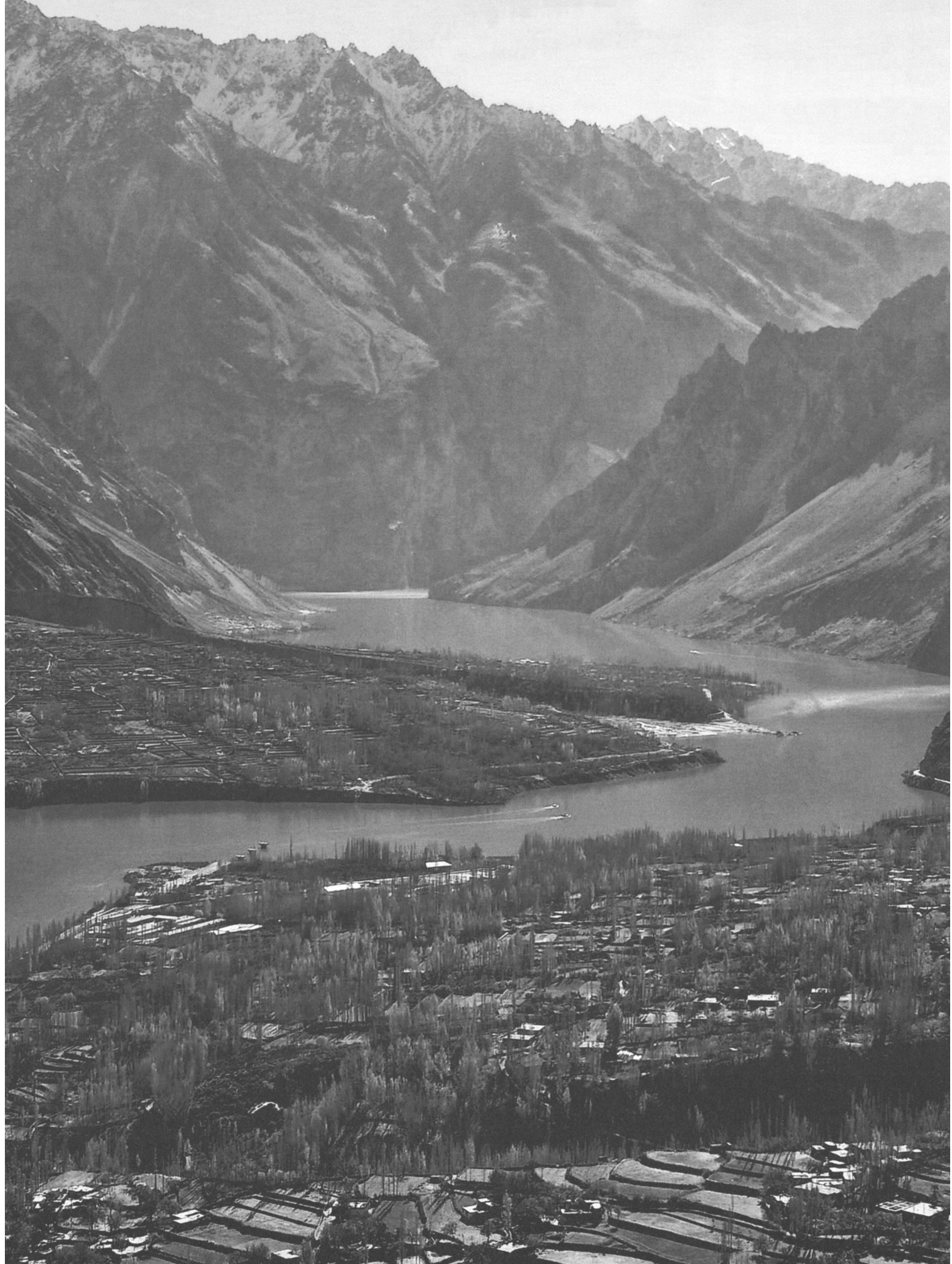
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# VISUALISING DISASTER

## Gojal after the Attabad landslide in Northern Pakistan

Text and Photos: *Martin Sökefeld*

### Introduction

Have a look at the **first photo**: A beautiful lake winding between high mountain ridges, separating two villages. This black and white image does not capture the full beauty of the landscape as it misses the deep blue colour of the water and the yellow and orange of the autumn poplar trees on the adjoining terraces. This does not look like a disaster. Yet local eyes would see a very different scene. They would look beneath the surface of the lake and the image and see inundated houses, bazaars and fields. Knowing that the all-important road, the road which literally leads to health, education and prosperity is the lake they see isolation and despair.

There was no lake in this valley before 2010. On January 4, 2010, a gigantic mass of rock came down the steep slopes above Attabad village in the Hunza Valley of Northern Pakistan. The landslide not only buried the Karakorum Highway (KKH) over a stretch of more than one kilometer but also formed a barrier which completely blocked the flow of the Hunza River. Gojal is located upstream from this barrier. The dammed river formed a lake which in summer 2010 extended to almost thirty kilometers. By then the southern-most village of Gojal, Ayeenabad, had been completely submerged as had about two thirds of Shishkat and a considerable part of Gulmit, the next two villages which can be seen on the first photograph. Hearing of disaster, we expect images of distress, misery and starvation; images perhaps meant to evoke pity

and to promote aid (Hayes 1991). Such images represent the extraordinary. Yet disaster is not always openly visible; the visual is ambivalent and sometimes deceptive. The photos included in this essay show the ordinary. They show what life has become after the landslide and the new routines of being forced to live with the lake. Some people in Gojal, rather reluctantly, admit the beauty of the lake and some even talk about new opportunities, especially for tourism. Yet the prevailing sentiment is one of loss and calamity<sup>1</sup>.

I took these photos during two brief visits in November 2010 and February 2011. These visits lasted for a total of three weeks. Whilst I have been acquainted with the area since my doctoral fieldwork in Pakistan's high-mountain area in the early 1990s, these were my first visits after the landslide<sup>2</sup>. The photos included in this essay attempt to capture certain aspects of life in Gojal since the formation of the lake. After a short introduction to society in Gojal, I will briefly discuss three consequences of the landslide which from a local perspective are considered the most disastrous effects of rising water levels within this area: destruction, (dis)connection and dependency.

### Gojal

Gojal is part of Gilgit-Baltistan, a sparsely populated high-mountain area which, following the dispute over Kashmir, is under the control of Pakistan. The people of Gojal belong to the Ismailiyya,

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the consequences of the Attabad landslide see Sökefeld, in press.

<sup>2</sup> Research on the Attabad landslide took place as a comparative study in a project on the politics of reconstruction after the earthquake of 2005 in Pakistan and Azad Kashmir, funded by SNF and DFG. I am most grateful to both organisations for their generous support.





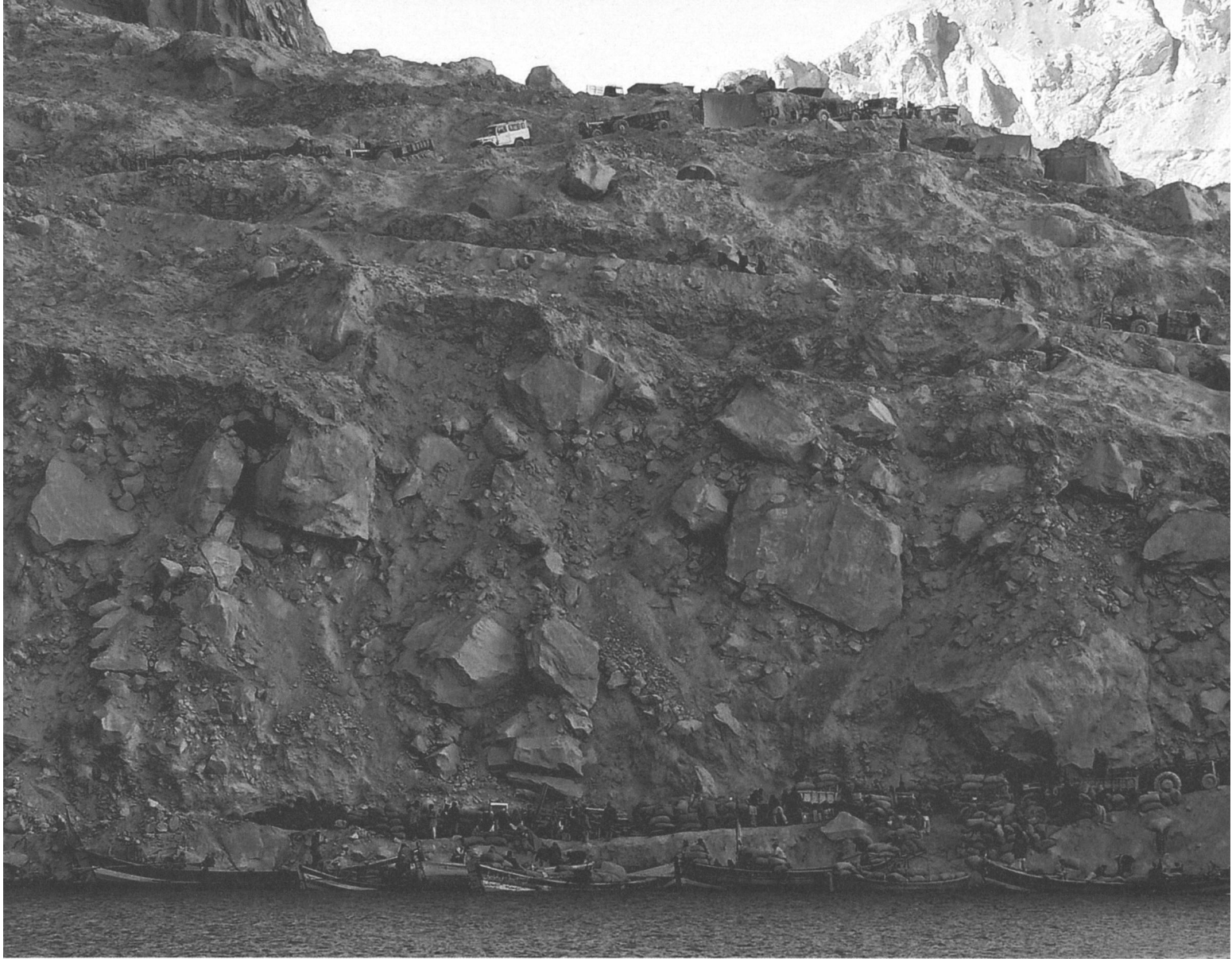


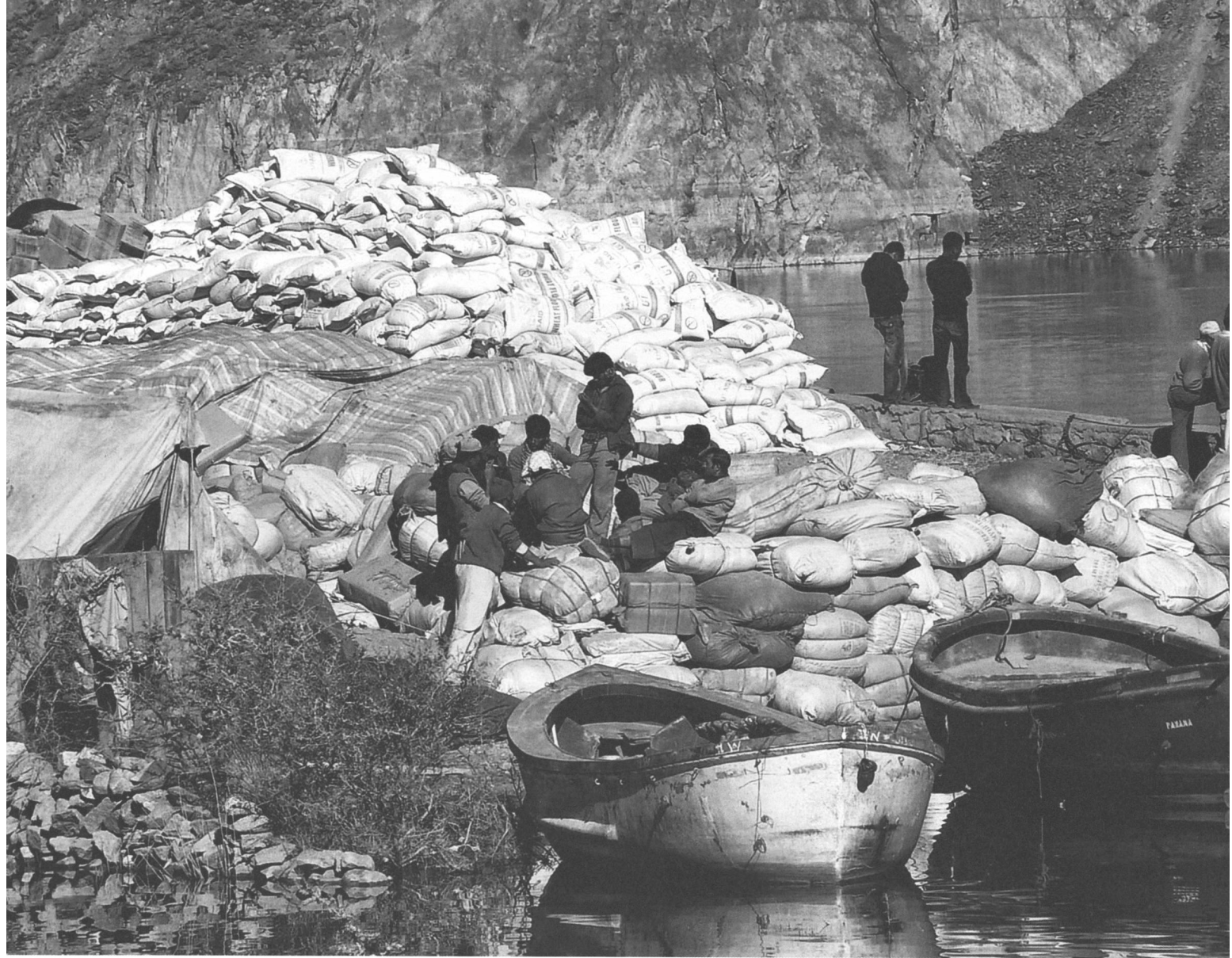


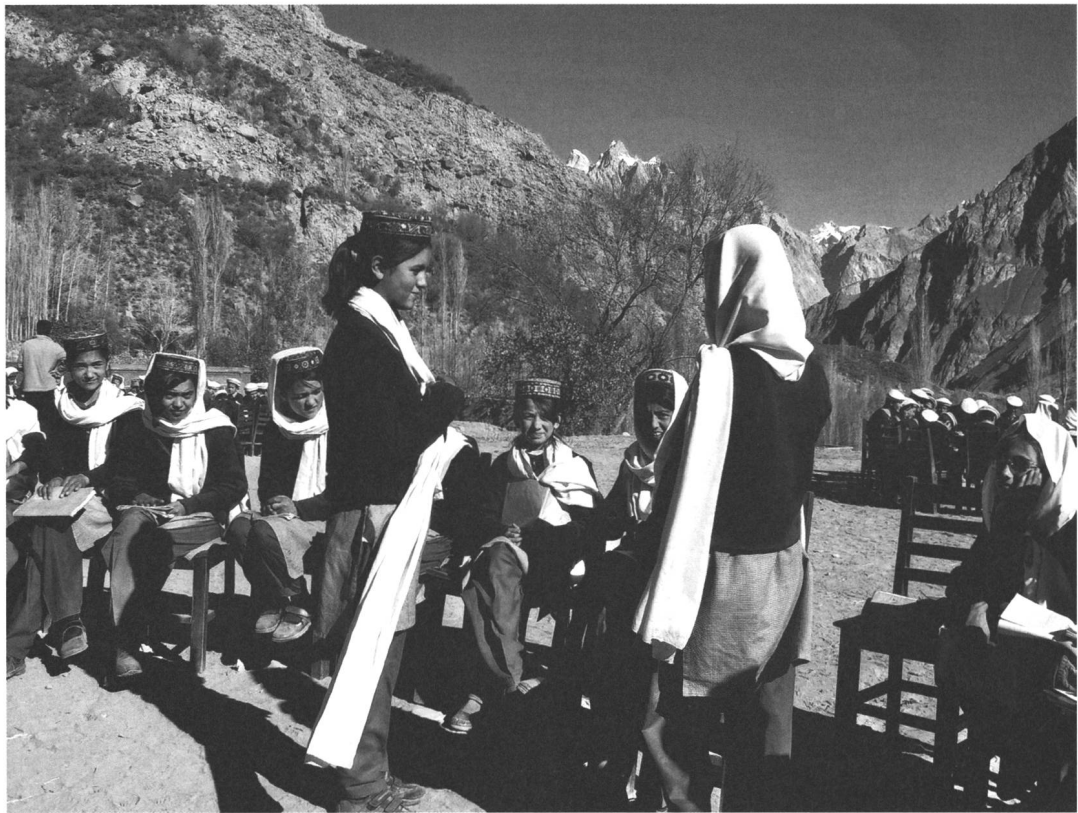












the section of Shia Islam which is headed by the Aga Khan. Accordingly, the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) is strongly engaged in the area and has successfully disseminated a development vision of self-organisation and community involvement. Education has become a very important value in Gojal. Most parents are determined to invest much money in their children's education. Uniquely for Pakistan, the literacy rate amongst the younger generation reaches a hundred percent. In many villages, English medium community schools have been established and are financed by parents' contributions.

The economy in Gojal is largely agrarian. Situated 2,500 m above sea level, Gojal is a single-crop area. Only a very small fraction of the region is suitable for agriculture. Cultivation depends on glacier-fed irrigation. Until a few decades ago, subsistence cultivation prevailed but the construction of the KKH which connects Pakistan with the Chinese province Xinjiang enabled market oriented agriculture. The road runs alongside the Hunza River through Gojal and enters Xinjiang at an altitude of 4690 m. Built originally for strategic purposes, the KKH is now an important trade connection. Potatoes have become the major cash-crop which was the basis of most families' income and enabled a certain prosperity. Yet the economy has been severely affected by the formation of the lake.

## Destruction

About 240 families have lost their houses to the water. After the landslide the people immediately anticipated the formation of a lake which threatened their villages. Fazal Abbas from Ayeenabad told me that he and his co-villagers immediately started to prepare for the disaster. After twenty days the water reached his village which soon was completely submerged. Shishkat and Gulmit were threatened next. In the affected villages possessions were moved to the upper parts. Low-lying houses were dismantled in order to save precious wooden construction materials. Yet many families felt unable to dismantle their own houses. Volunteers organised by the Ismaili councils did this work. Women and children were kept away because they could not bear to see the destruction of their homes. Most affected families moved in with relatives. In Gulmit the neighbourhood of Goze was particularly affected. A birds-eye view of Goze shows the destroyed houses, some of which emerged out of the water when in autumn 2010 water levels receded due to a reduction in the flow of water from melting glaciers (**photo 2**). Girls wrote graffiti of grief and nostalgia for lost homes on the wall of a ruined house: «Miss u Goze» and «Love u Goze» (**photo 3**). In Gulmit, the main bazaar comprising 130 shops alongside the KKH has been inundated by the lake (**photo 4**).

## (Dis)connection

Until a few decades ago Gojal was self-sufficient in almost all realms of life. This changed quickly after the construction of the KKH. Agriculture became increasingly market-oriented and trade of the produce depended upon the road, as did other segments of the economy like tourism and trade. Earlier, Gojal had been an exploited part of the little kingdom of Hunza. The ruler of Hunza prevented the emigration of people from Gojal. The abolition of the kingdom in 1974 together with the construction of the KKH enabled an increasing orientation towards Pakistan. Many people left the valleys in search of work and education. The KKH became a lifeline connecting Gojal with Pakistan but was suddenly broken on January 4, 2010. This disconnection affects the whole population of Gojal, some 20,000 people, not just those families that have lost their fields and houses to the lake.

In the first weeks after the landslide the area was totally cut off. Then a provisional boat service across the growing lake was established to re-connect Gojal. The government brought a few boats for passenger transport but these leaked and were soon out of service. Private traders launched boats to resume trade with China. People are generally forced to travel on private boats, often sitting on top of the cargo. Even wedding parties have to move by boat now (**photo 5**).

Travel and transport have become difficult, time consuming and expensive. Coming from China, goods have to be loaded onto the boats at the northern end of the lake. The journey across the lake takes almost two hours (**photo 6**). Travel is especially difficult and dangerous in winter when waves and strong icy winds shake the boats and the splash water freezes on cargo and crew. When a boat has reached the southern end of the lake, the cargo is unloaded and put on tractors or jeeps which carry the goods on a provisional dirt road over a huge barrier of debris (**photos 7 and 8**) down to the KKH where they are finally loaded on trucks. Now, Gojali farmers have difficulties to sell and ship their crops. Because of high transport costs traders offer only very low rates. Other sources of income like tourism and local trade suffered greatly, too, while prices have risen sharply. Many families are now very short of money. Two thirds of parents have stopped paying fees for the community schools.

## Dependency

Gojalis have been proud of their relative prosperity. Until the formation of the lake they never depended on outside support. A few weeks after the landslide, local shops experienced

shortages of many goods. A food crisis was imminent. In late 2010, two large-scale but ill coordinated relief operations by the Chinese government and the World Food Programme started and brought basic food items. These were sufficient to feed the whole population of Gojal for several months. Sacks of food aid piled up at the lakeside and were distributed at the Jamaat Khanas, the Ismaili community centres (**photos 9 and 10**). Some peasants have returned to subsistence farming, planting wheat for self-consumption instead of potatoes for the market. Generally, people do not like relief and say that they do not need such aid, that they need regular income instead. They fear dependency. Also, relief does not cover the fees for

schools and universities. Most parents worry about their children's education because they are unable to pay tuition fees. That is, they worry about the future of their families, about the future of Gojal. They demand that the lake must be drained. An army corps is working to cut a spillway through the debris of the landslide, with very little success. The water level has hardly been lowered and most people have lost trust in the army's and government's efforts. At a community school in Gulmit, girls stage a drama (**photo 11**). Some play workers of relief agencies, others play local women. They negotiate their plan of action. In the end a girl exclaims: «We don't want relief, we want that the lake disappears!»

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## AUTHOR

**Martin Sökefeld** is professor of social anthropology at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich. He first visited Gilgit-Baltistan in 1991 in order to conduct fieldwork on ethnicity. His current research focuses on the anthropology of disasters.

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