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after the Attabad landslide – A visual essay

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Disaster and (im)mobility:
Restoring mobility in Gojal after the Attabad landslide
A visual essay

Martin Sökefeld



Introduction

Very often, disasters set people in motion. Volcano outbreaks, floods or earthquakes destroy the homes and livelihood of people and often leave them with little choice but to flee the site of disaster. While many of the affected people move out, agents of humanitarianism rush in. In some cases, however, people cannot move to safer places because the required infrastructure has been destroyed, too. The destruction of infrastructure may be long-lasting, resulting in an ongoing obstruction of mobility. This article details such a case. It deals with a disaster that suddenly trapped highly mobile people in their area and tells how mobility was restored but remained precarious nevertheless.



On the morning of January 4, 2010, the Hunza valley in Northern Pakistan was hit by an extraordinary landslide: The whole flank of a mountain broke off and, together with half of the village Attabad, rushed down the steep slope. An immense mass of rubble and boulders filled the valley. The blockade created by the rockslide is more than a kilometer wide. This huge mass blocked the flow of the Hunza River and buried the Karakorum Highway (KKH), the only road leading from Pakistan into the upstream area of Gojal (Upper Hunza).



While mobility has increasingly become a focus of social theory, I am of the opinion that it cannot be fully understood without considering its opposite, immobility. Mobility is a synecdoche for the dynamics of contemporary society and it can be understood both literally, as physical movement, travel and migration, and metaphorically, as social movement and mobilization. Mobility has become the normality of life. While most of the time it is simply taken for granted, the centrality of mobility in social life becomes visible when it is suddenly interrupted. Yet even then people do not simply “freeze” but take great efforts to overcome the state of motionlessness. Paradoxically, immobility mobilizes people, both literally and metaphorically. This is also the case with the Attabad landslide. Thus, a period of immobility may be a trigger for significant social dynamics and change. In this article I describe the consequences of the sudden immobility created by the landslide for the people of Gojal, the efforts to restore movement and the creation of a new traffic system. I am doing this only in part by a written text. In addition, I rely on visual representation through photographs which capture the environment created by the landslide much better than words. In this article, visual representation of the disaster focuses on the boats brought to the lake. Before the landslide, there have never been such boats in area. In my own perception and experience the boats became the symbol of the disaster of being trapped in the mountains, of the precariousness of connection and of the people’s struggle to regain mobility.



While I had come to Gojal for the first time during fieldwork for my PhD thesis in Gilgit between 1991 and 1993, I visited the area for the first time after the landslide in November 2010. I still remember vividly how I crossed the debris and caught a glimpse of the lake for the first time. I was struck by the lucid blue-green color of the water, such a stark contrast to the normal grey of the Hunza-River which is due to its heavy load of silt from the glaciers. During all my visits I felt a stark contradiction between the visual beauty of the lake, especially on sunny days, and the destruction it had brought. Since my first visit I have travelled to Gojal once or twice every year and followed the unfolding of events especially in the village of Gulmit. The focus of my research has largely been on the political consequences of the disaster as it has engendered unprecedented mobilization of protest in Gojal (Sökefeld 2012). This protest was directly connected with the issue of (im)mobility: People demanded the reconnection of their area and protested against what they perceived as insufficient action undertaken by the government in this regard. The present text, however, focuses more on movement in the literal, physical sense. In local perception, disconnection and immobility is not simply the consequence of the disaster, it is the disaster.



Mobile Gojal

Gojal is a sub-district of Hunza-Nager district in Gilgit-Baltistan, the high-mountain area in Northern Pakistan. Villages are situated between 2.400 and 3.000 m above sea-level and many of the surrounding peaks reach beyond 7.000 m. The inhabitants of Gojal belong to three ethno-linguistic groups. Wakhi is the most widely spoken language, followed by Burushaski and a tiny Domaaki minority. All groups are affiliated with the Ismaili branch of Islam which is headed by the Aga Khan.

While people living in high-mountains are often described as being “isolated” and rather “cut-off” from the rest of the world, this was absolutely not the case with Gojal. Even long before the age of modern road construction the people from Hunza were well known for their quick movement and extended raids, mainly into the Kirghiz areas of what is today the Chinese province of Xinjiang. While the people have never been simply “stuck in the mountains”, mobility grew exponentially after the completion of the Karakorum Highway (KKH) in 1978. The KKH links Pakistan with China. It became a busy trade-route and helped much to integrate Hunza and the whole of Gilgit-Baltistan economically into Pakistan.



Gojal is the last Pakistani area before the KKH enters China over the Khunjerab-Pass, at an altitude of 4.700m. In the village Sost Gojal houses a dry-port where goods from China and from Pakistan are reloaded, stored and exchanged. For many people from Gojal, the KKH was the route of migration to down-country Pakistan in search of education or employment (Benz 2013). After more than thirty years, many Gojali families have become multi-local. They have branched out spatially, with significant parts being settled in Gilgit, the capital of Gilgit-Baltistan, or in the big cities of Pakistan, especially in Karachi and Islamabad. Individuals move frequently between the sections of their families that are located in different cities. However, the KKH was not only important for movement between Gojal and Pakistan, but also for mobility within Gilgit-Baltistan. Many goods and services are available in Gilgit city only, or require at least a visit to Aliabad, the center of Hunza. Life in Gojal was to a great extent synonymous with moving or “wayfaring” (Ingold 2009) along the KKH.



The initial phase of the disaster

Compared with the large-scale disasters which Pakistan saw in recent years – like the earthquake of October 2005 with more than 80.000 victims – the Attabad landslide was only a minor disaster. It claimed the lives of nineteen inhabitants of the village. Its consequences, however, did not only affect Attabad village but the whole population of the upstream area of Gojal (Upper Hunza), around 20.000 people.

Disaster research distinguishes between “slow onset” and “quick onset” disasters. The Attabad landslide combined both types. The village of Attabad was hit by a quick onset disaster which in a few minutes destroyed half of the village, its terraces, fields and orchards. Also the road was destroyed in this sudden moment of disaster. Yet the landslide also blocked the flow of the river and created a lake that grew continuously over the following six months until the water spilled over the crest of the debris. By then the water had inundated one village, Ayeenabad, completely. Considerable parts of two more villages, Shishkat and Gulmit, had also gone under water, while a few houses each were affected in Ghulkin and in Hussein. In addition, bazaars, fields and orchards were inundated.



Gojal has probably never been self-sufficient in terms of food – most mountain communities rely on a mixture of economic strategies for survival, including trade. With easy mobility on the KKH, exchange with and dependency on “the outside” – especially “down-country” Pakistan – had increased. Taking advantage of their very high level of education which is facilitated by the strong commitment of the Aga Khan Development Network in the area, many people from Gojal have found employment with NGOs in Hunza, Gilgit, or even beyond. But also those who continued agriculture did not produce in the first place for their own consumption but for the market. In the last decades Gojal had become a prime area for the production of seed potatoes which were sold to the markets of the Punjab.



When people from the upstream area saw the dimension of the landslide, they immediately realized that their area would be cut-off from Pakistan and from the flow of supplies for a longer time. A food crisis was imminent. People rushed to the shops in their villages and stored provisions. But the shops were soon emptied. In the first days after the landslide, Gojal was indeed cut off. Because the border-post on the Khunjerab-Pass is generally closed from December to May, there was also no exit to China at that time. Moving stories tell how in this time people shared wheat flour needed for their staple bread because their neighbors had ran out of stock. These are examples for the disaster *communitas* that often characterizes calamity-hit areas immediately after the impact. Post-disaster altruism, however, quickly gives way to the “normal” state of affairs, and especially the arrival of relief goods generally causes competition and conflict over the distribution of such goods.



In Gojal, however, there was no relief for the time being. In the first weeks it was possible to climb over the mound of debris but this was a hazardous undertaking and it was not possible to carry larger quantities of supplies over the blockade. In early February, when the water started to submerge Ayeenabad village, the KKH between the village and the blockade was flooded and it was no longer possible to reach the barrier by road or even on foot as in this section perpendicular cliffs of solid rock rise out of the water. The water level was increasing by more than 0.5 meters per day.



Gojal could only be reached by the helicopters of the Pakistan Army and the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), but due to adverse weather conditions sorties were often suspended for several consecutive days. Stories about the helicopters tell about the growing alienation between “the people” and “the government”: People complained that they often had to stay behind because some important officers “wanted to have a look”. In any case, the limited helicopter services were utterly insufficient to supply the population of Gojal with food and other necessary goods. In this time, a food crisis was imminent. In order to point out the gravity of the situation, the coordinator of the World Food Program (WFP) for Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Kashmir who happened to be from Gojal himself, told me later that “the people started to eat their own potatoes.” In the local conception, potatoes are not considered as staple food but only as sabzi (vegetable): Sabzi alone does not fill the stomach but wheat which is needed for all kinds of bread, the staple food, was getting short because the local farmers produced mostly potatoes for export and people were used to buy cheap, subsidized wheat flour from the shops.



Moving Boats

In mid-February the NDMA brought some boats to the lake for the transport of people. There have never been any boats in the area before. But these boats were old, leaky and unsafe, and soon they were defunct. In March traders who were eager to resume transport because they still had goods stored in the Sost dry-port, launched larger wooden boats. These boats mainly carried goods but also took passengers. The Frontier Works Organization (FWO), an army engineering corps, had started to dig a spillway through the debris and also built a provisional access road, literally a “dirt road” across the barrier down to the KKH. Slowly, a new way of travel and transport developed: Because the road across the blockade was steep and very bad, trucks could not reach the shore of the growing lake. Thus, goods arriving by boat had to be loaded on tractors or jeeps that carried them across the debris down to the KKH where they were loaded onto the trucks for further transport to down-country Pakistan.



The boats were initially brought from the Tarbela-Lake, the large reservoir further down on the River Indus, and owned by non-Gojali traders. The boats are fitted with two outboard engines and propellers, one on each side. They are manned with a “captain” who steers and who is mostly also from the Tarbela region, and a helper who starts the engine and collects the fees from the passengers. Over the years, the people got used to the boat service and a new travel routine was established. In the first year, boat traffic was tremendous as many goods from China were still stored in the Sost dry-port. On the way down, passengers often had to sit on top of the cargo for want of other space. As much less goods are exported from Pakistan to China than in the opposite direction, boats are often empty on the way up which was consequentially much more comfortable. Because the KKH did not only connect Gojal with the outside but served also as connection between the villages of Gojal, also travel within the region was affected.



After the boats came also relief in the form of food aid: In autumn 2010 the World Food Program brought flour, rice, and other items sufficient to feed the whole population of Gojal for two months across the lake. More aid, however, came from the opposite direction: China provided food for about eight months and repeated this aid in the years 2011 and 2013.

Travel and transport by boat is arduous, costly and prolongs the journey to Central Hunza, Gilgit and beyond. It is especially difficult for old people and for patients, including emergency cases, who have to take the boats as there is no doctor in Gojal. In every winter, the lake froze for several weeks. During these weeks Gojal was completely cut off again. Also when the lake is not completely frozen, strong winds that prevail in winter in the valley often make the journey dangerous or even outright impossible. Several patients lost their lives because they could not reach a hospital in time.



Economic Crisis

Transport of goods became very expensive as cargo had to be reloaded several times. This gravely affected agriculture in Gojal. Because the transport of potatoes became so expensive, traders offered local farmers only very much reduced rates for their produce. Often, farmers were offered only one third of the rate they had received before the landslide. In autumn 2010, many sacks of potatoes were shipped across the lake. Recognizing, however, that potato farming was not remunerative anymore as the returns did not even cover the expenses for fertilizer and diesel for the tractors, most families gave up potato farming in the following years. Many reverted to wheat cultivation for their own subsistence or left their fields fallow. Thus, the landslide and the blockade of the road had significant economic consequences for the people of Gojal: Prices for “imported” goods soared while the income of most families was very much reduced. This had severe implications for education: Many families were unable to pay the school or university fees for their children. Many local schools are organized by the people themselves and draw all their revenue from the students’ fees. These schools now lacked the funds to pay the teachers. In spite of a one-time government subsidy the whole system seemed to be jeopardized. Because of the great value that is put on education the greatest worry was thus that the landslide endangered the people’s future.



Disaster economy: Opportunities and conflicts

But the lake also brought new economic opportunities. Many men started to work as porters at the boat-stands at both ends of the lake and especially in the first years they were able to make good money there. Work is self-organized. Workers are grouped in parties the members of which mostly derive from the same village or at least the same area. A munshi (“writer”) has to take care of the equal distribution of work to the parties. Beside men from Gojal especially men from adjacent Nager do these jobs as the southern end of the lake is close to this area. Initially, Nagerkuts worked at both ends of the lake.

In summer 2011 a dispute about the distribution of cargo work between parties from Gojal and from Nager at the northern end of the lake, which at that time was near the Gojali village of Hussaini, escalated to a fight. Many transport contractors are from Nager and the Gojali workers had the impression that the contractors favored the laborers from Nager, giving them more jobs than the Gojalis. Both parties called for help and more Nagerkuts (people from Nager) rushed across the lake to support their fellows. In the fight, a few nearby houses were attacked and damaged. They were stopped only by the intervention of Shia imams from Nager. After that, workers were strictly separated and men from Nager remained at the southern end of the lake while only Gojalis worked at its northern shore.



Other economic opportunities were taken up by the boat owners and the captains. Initially all of them were from outside the region, but in 2011 some local people pooled resources and had their own boats built. Yet the boat business was quite risky and many boats were destroyed in winter when the lake froze, resulting in heavy losses for some of the owners. Further, at both ends of the lake small make-shift bazaars developed, with little restaurants, shops and diesel sellers catering for the needs of workers and travelers. While the southern end of the lake, at the spillway, remained fixed, the northern end shifted according to the length of the lake. Initially, the lake, measuring more than twenty-five kilometers in length, reached up to the village of Hussaini and the boat-stand was located there. All the tributaries of the Hunza-River come from glaciers and carry a huge load of sand and silt with them which quickly filled the lake between Gulmit and Hussaini. In addition, the water level was lowered in consequence of the FWO's efforts to dig the spillway.



Thus, the northern end of the lake moved consecutively southwards as did the boat-stand. Since winter 2012/13 it was located at the southern end of Gulmit, just opposite Shishkat, where before 2010 a bridge across the river had connected the two villages. At my last visit in March 2014, the lake had moved even further south and did not even properly reach Gulmit anymore. Sand has been banked up there in order to enable access to the boats. But because in winter this particular spot is regularly hit by avalanches, it was closed for passengers and only heavy goods were allowed for loading and unloading there. Passengers had to disembark the boats at Shishkat on the lake's opposite bank. In order to reach Gulmit and the rest of Gojal, one had to cross the quite vast area of the village, to climb down to the river at its other side where a small and shaky wooden foot-bridge had been constructed in order to cross the river to the Gulmit side. From there it was still half an hour walk to reach Gulmit village. Thus, travel had become once more time-consuming and troublesome, especially if one carried loads and luggage – or much more expensive if one was lucky enough to catch a jeep or a tractor that carried one across Shishkat and, from the other side of the bridge, further on to Gulmit. In addition, this arrangement was not very safe as the bridge had already been washed away once, only a few days after its construction. Thus, people almost constantly had to adjust to new routines of travel.



Although the southern end of the lake remained fixed, the spillway changed its character considerably over the years. Most importantly, the access road across the barrier was extended and improved and since summer 2013 trucks and heavy machinery could directly reach the shore of the lake.

Efforts to drain the lake completely remained inefficient and the water-level could not be reduced sufficiently to bring the KKH completely out of the water again. Especially the Chinese government was highly interested in re-aligning the KKH because the highway is a significant link between Western China and the Pakistani deep-sea port at Gwadar in Baluchistan. Also Gwadar Port had been constructed by China in order to facilitate Chinese exports. In January 2012 an agreement was signed for the realignment of the KKH through the construction of three tunnels between the spillway and Ayeenabad village over a length of altogether seven kilometers. Being mostly funded by Chinese loans the project was given to the China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC). Works started in Summer 2012 and progress at a very high pace. At the time of writing in spring 2014, the digging of two of the tunnels was completed and the third one was well underway. Completion of the realignment of the KKH, including the completion of a new bridge between the villages of Gulmit and Shishkat, is expected for late 2015 or early 2016.



Displacement – another movement

While the focus of this article is the obstruction and reconstruction of mobility from Gojal to Pakistan and within Gojal, also another kind of short distance mobility has to be mentioned that has been induced by the disaster. This concerns the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). Since the Swat crisis of 2008 and 2009, when the battles between the Pakistani army and the Taliban over the Swat valley displaced around two million people from their area, “IDPs” has become a an often used concept in Pakistan. In the context of the Attabad disaster, those persons are categorized as IDPs who have lost their homes to the lake. This concerns altogether about 450 households. They were displaced in different ways: While those from the villages of Attabad, Ayeenabad and Shishkat moved to preliminary shelters in two camps in Central Hunza because no safe land was available in these places, those from Gulmit did not have to leave their village but were accommodated by their own relatives. The IDPs received small aid packages from different NGOs. In 2011, government paid a compensation of 600.000 PKR (ca. 4.800 Euro) per household. In addition, they received a larger share of the food relief provided by the Chinese government.

Initially for the purpose of getting government compensation, the IDPs formed a committee which is now generally representing the IDPs interests. In contrast to the IDPs from the other villages those in Gulmit are now resettled in new houses. Many other inhabitants of Gulmit resent very much that the IDPs still claim “IDP-status” and successfully fought for the lion’s share of China’s food aid in 2013.

The opposition of IDPs versus non-IDPs is now a pervasive feature of village society. In a certain respect, the IDPs became a new social category.



Conclusion

The Attabad landslide brought movement out of Gojal to a sudden halt. While only a few families were directly affected by the landslide, the entire population of the sub-district suffered from the disconnection and the ensuing economic crisis. Yet people did not remain immobile but struggled to reestablish connection and mobility. The years after the landslide were a period of hardship which deeply impacted social routines. However, also new techniques and routines were developed. The establishment of the boat-traffic across the lake brought new issues of social organization and conflict and, besides all difficulties, also new economic opportunities. Drawing also on other examples of disaster, it is safe to conclude that post-disaster periods are not only times of suffering but also of creativity and innovation.

Given the speed with which the Chinese company and their sub-contractors are building the new road including tunnels and the bridge, it seems indeed possible that the gap in the KKH will be closed soon. During the boat-trip after my last visit in Gulmit in March 2014¹ the thought crossed my mind that this might have been my last boat-journey across Attabad Lake as I will be able to return only more than a year later, when, possibly, the road will be realigned again. But even when the boats are gone, traces of the disaster will remain: in memory and narratives, and perhaps even in social structure.

1 Since 2010, fieldwork in Gojal took place within the framework of different projects funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, and German Academic Exchange Service. I am grateful to all these agencies for their generous funding.

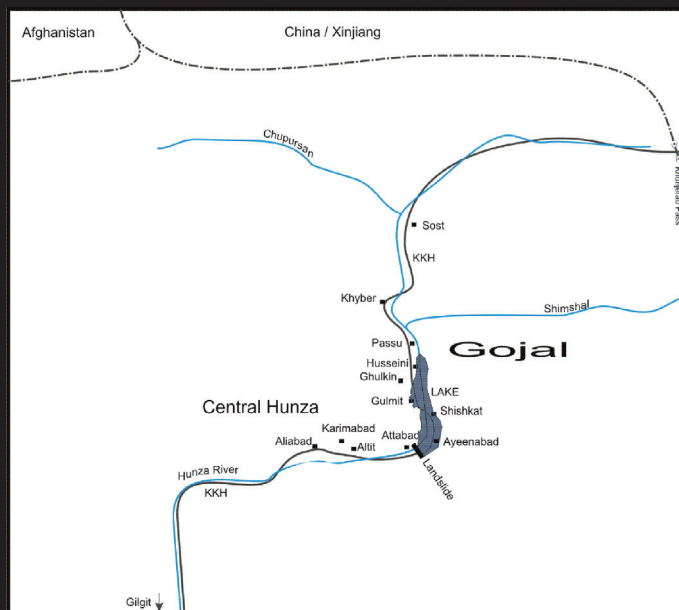


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Captions of the photographs

- P 2: The spillway in November 2010
- P 3: Watching the lake from the blockade
- P 4: Destroyed houses in Gulmit
- P 7: Starting the engine
- P 9: A wedding party leaving Gulmit by boat
- P 10: Sacks of potatoes at the spillway in November 2010
- P 12: Truck drivers seeking shelter behind cargo in January 2011
- P 13: The boat-stand at Hussaini just below the ice of Hussaini-Glacier in January 2011
- P 14: Ice on the lake in February 2012
- P 15: Loading tyres from China on a boat at Gulmit boat-stand in September 2013
- P 16: The munshi distributing work
- P 17: The boat-stand at the spillway in September 2013
- P 19: Laborers awaiting a boat at the spillway
- P 22: Clouds of dust from the construction of the tunnels



Sketch-map of Gojal (not to scale) showing the lake at the time of its longest extension in summer 2010.

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