



When the Silk Road Vanished

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“I still need to cross [Attabad](#) before I reach home” – so our Shimshali travel companion commented matter-of-factly. We had just spent ten days walking along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, and the best part of the last two days being jostled around in jeeps. Now we were in Karimabad, the tourist hub in [central Hunza](#), and it was time for goodbyes. Yet the ninety-minute boat journey between Attabad and Gulmit that lay ahead for our companion before he reached his village was something no local looked forward to. Maybe I was imagining it, but it appeared that the thought of the crossing compounded his exhaustion.



“Attabad Lake” was formed following a massive landslide in upper Hunza on 4 January 2010 which swept away the village of Attabad and severed the region’s main transport artery, the Karakoram Highway (KKH); the highway is popularly considered a present-day variant on a historic Silk Road (Urdu: *Shahra-e-Resham*). The aftershocks of the Attabad disaster affected all of upper Hunza’s twenty thousand residents. Not only had debris from the landslide buried the KKH, it also dammed the flow of the Hunza river. By the start of summer, the water had extended twenty kilometers (and become up to a hundred meters deep in places); upriver agricultural land and villages were flooded.

The Attabad disaster manifested as a new violent reality for locals: there was destruction of habitat and community, loss of land and erosion of livelihoods, and erasure of vital infrastructure, such as the arterial road and the essential mobilities it had previously sustained.

The Karakoram mountain range in northern Pakistan is the most heavily glaciated region of the world outside of extreme latitudes (Hewitt 2006). The Karakoram – and the western terminus of the Himalaya – make up [Gilgit-Baltistan](#), an administrative unit home to about two million people. While mobility across the region is facilitated by roads, access depends on *the* road – usually there is only one – being passable; hazards such as landslides and flooding can sever vehicular access to and within Gilgit-Baltistan. Today, nearly all the towns and villages in Gilgit-Baltistan can be reached by vehicular transport.

