



ETHNIC CONFLICTS IN NORTHEAST INDIA AND BALOCHISTAN IN PAKISTAN: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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| Abstract

This article examines the comparative study on ethnic conflicts in Northeast India and Balochistan of Pakistan focusing on the political actors and factors of the insurgencies. This article argues that ethnic conflicts in Northeast India and Balochistan in Pakistan have become institutionalized form of armed violence due to economic deprivation, political domination, cultural injustice, lack of communication, resource competition etc. Moreover, the politicization of issues like governance, political economy, colonialism, role of central government, foreign intervention and media coverage significantly promotes ethnic insurgencies into nationalist movements with a view to achieving their self-determination in their respective territories. The article looks at the representation of these political causes of ethnic conflicts as well as how and to what extent ethnic conflicts in Northeast India are different from that of Balochistan in Pakistan.

| Keywords

Ethnic Conflict, Northeast India, Balochistan, Comparative Study

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Introduction

Ethnic conflict in contemporary time has become one of the central issues of discussion among the scholars, social scientists, academicians and others. Ethnic conflict in its extreme form "is characterised by large scale violence, widespread insurgency and extensive civil war causing death, decay, destruction, misery and sufferings."¹ However, after the fall of Soviet Union and the socialist regimes in the East Europe, the world has witnessed further intensification of ethnic conflicts. These ethnic uprisings have threatened the political integrity of many a multinational state and led to the birth of new

sovereign states. Some of the ethnic conflicts in the world led to genocide, ethnic cleansing and displacement of millions of innocent people.

In the South Asian region, both India and Pakistan witnessed ethnic insurgencies in their respective territories. In India, ethnic conflict is started in Northeast India with a view to achieving the right to self-determination and autonomy. Northeast Indian ethnic conflicts can be categorized into five types. These are:

1. Movement of indigenous communities for secession to be a distinct nation.
2. The Nagas movement for independent Nagalim
3. Movement for language and culture
4. Movement against illegal migrants
5. Movement against other indigenous ethnic groups within the region.

On the other hand, Balochistan has been adversely affected by ethnic clashes, insurgency and counter insurgency since independence. Ethnic conflicts in Balochistan can be divided into two categories:

Movement for Independence from Pakistan

Movement for self-autonomy within Pakistan

Historical Account

Northeast India

Northeastern India consists of eight states: Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland and Sikkim.² The Northeastern states were established during the British Raj of the 19th and early 20th centuries after the British victory of Anglo-Burmese war. After Indian Independence from British Rule in 1947, the Northeastern region became a part of India. The Northeast India is a region poorly connected to the Indian mainland by a small corridor and surrounded by many countries such as Bhutan, Myanmar, Bangladesh and China. However, out of India's 67.76 million tribals, 8.14 million people live in seven northeastern states.³

Since Independence, the people of Northeast India demanded regional autonomy and complete independence as they face social, political and economic and cultural injustice by the central government. And the pro-independence leaders took violent way to achieve their goal. However, to solve the problem, Indian government launched an offensive operation in Assam, Manipur, Nagaland and Tripura. This led to a retaliatory attack on civilians by tribal guerrillas. As a result of ethnic conflict, about 882 persons died and more than 76,000 persons are victims of internally displacement in Northeast India in 2010.⁴

Balochistan

Balochistan "was a British colony but never part of the British Indian Empire".⁵ From 1876, it was a self-governing British Protectorate. In August 1947, Britain granted Balochistan independence, separately from India and Pakistan, as it did with Nepal. This independence was short-lived. On August 15, 1947, the day after the partition of India and Pakistan, the Pakistani government forcibly annexed Balochistan.

However, the Baloch people demanded greater control of the province's natural resources and political autonomy. Contrary, they have become economically marginalised and poor compared to the rest of Pakistan. This discrimination created Baloch nationalist movement and "rise of guerrilla war by insurgent groups like Balochistan Liberation Army, Lashkar-e-Balochistan and the Baloch Liberation United Front (BLUF)."⁶ Like Indian government, Pakistan took military solution in this insurgency, which resulted in "killing of 1628 civilians and displacement of more than 140,000 persons in 2004-2009."⁷

Comparing ethnic conflicts of Northeast India with Balochistan

Now, the paper focuses on the political factors that contributed to the ethnic conflicts in Northeast India and Balochistan in Pakistani in a comparative analysis.

Issue of Governance

According to Dr Clemens Spiess, "the politics of identity lie at the heart of bigger part of the current conflict constellation in the Northeast."⁸ The identity politics creates suspicion among the ethnic groups of the Northeast India. As the people of Northeast India want autonomous rule in their so called motherland, the central government think of it as a biggest challenge for the integrity of Indian Territory. Henceforth, the central government passed the AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Power Act) in 1972. In fact, AFSPA was " a short-term measure to allow deployment of the army to counter armed separatist movement in the Naga Hills, has been in place for the last five decades and was extended to all the seven states of the Northeast region."⁹ The way the central government responded to the demand of Northeast Indian People was wrong. Because, instead of resolving the problem, it led to an ongoing escalation of the conflict bringing a military initiative. Additionally, the armies make human rights violation which leads to the radicalization and militarism of the region and weakens the possibility of political solution to the crisis.

Balochistan, which is called the heart of Pakistan, is replete with precious natural resources and minerals. The bad governance is a major cause in the backwardness of Balochistan in the field of education, agriculture, health etc. Not to mention, the bureaucracy is the main organ of governance through which system is run. Unfortunately, the bureaucracy is highly politicized. Transfer postings are made on the basis of political interests. The honest and capable officers of Balochistan are maligned and are made Officers on Special Duty (OSD). In fact, article 148(3) of the Constitution says, "It shall be the duty of the Federation to protect every Province against external aggression and internal disturbance."¹⁰ Not to mention, bad governance and corruption have worsened the condition of the province. Moreover, "lack of good governance caused some misunderstanding and distrust among Baloch people."¹¹ This distrust is the major source of ethnic conflict in Balochistan province. So, the political analysts are arguing that, "political parties should come together to play their part in fighting against bad governance and leadership crises in the province."¹²

Political Economy

As India opted for capitalist path of development since its independence, some part of the country became rich and some became backward and underdeveloped. Northeast India is the victim of the second one where " 90 percent of the people in the Northeast live in the village and depend on agriculture and allied activities for their survival."¹³ As there have not available sources of employment, people feel that they are losing control over land, water and forest. This creates insecurity among the communities of Northeast India. As a result, people "tend to organize themselves along ethnic lines to protect their economic interest."¹⁴ Moreover, the conflict over material interest has been in different ethnic movements in Assam and Tripura. For instance, ULFA " defends its struggle for independent Assam by highlighting how the Indian State exploited the natural resources like oil and tea and deliberately kept the province of Assam underdeveloped for decades."¹⁵

Balochistan "having 44% of Pakistan territory shares only 5% of country's total population."¹⁶ Balochistan has immense geo-strategic importance and huge untapped natural resource reserves such as oil, gas, gold, copper and others. In fact, Balochistan presents the picture of extreme poverty, backwardness, and lagging far behind than other provinces in terms of social and economic indicators. According to the Asian Human Rights Commission's 2009 report: "88% of the population of Balochistan is under the poverty line. Balochistan has the lowest literacy rate, the lowest school enrolment ratio,

educational attainment index and health index compared to the other provinces. 78% of the population has no access to electricity and 79% has no access to natural gas."¹⁷ Moreover, The people of the province have no authority to run their own economic affairs and have no control over their natural resources. So, the inhabitants of Balochistan revolted five times against the federation for more political and economic rights. The nationalists of Balochistan maintains that, "the federation is only interested to enjoy the geostrategic and economic potentials of the province".¹⁸ Because, the people of the province have no authority to run their own economic affairs and have no control over their natural resources.

Colonialism and Exploitation

At the time of British colonialism over Indian subcontinent, "Bengali Muslims peasants are encouraged to migrate and settle in Assam for agricultural purpose."¹⁹ So, the taken by the British government sowed the seeds of ethnic tensions in the plains of Assam and latter in Tripura which contributed to the rise of ethnic conflicts in the Northeast India. Moreover, because of coming of outsiders, the indigenous people feel that they have become minority in their own land. Although the indigenous people constitute majority in the hill states of Northeast, they " still worry about the possible influx of outsiders into their states and their fears - real or imaginary - at times drive them to violent attacks against the communities considered by them as outsiders."²⁰

Pakistan was once a victim of colonialism. Now it has turned "a colonial master and adopts the imperialist tactics to subjugate and exploit Balochistan."²¹ Balochistan's natural resources have been looted by Pakistan's political, military and big business elite, while most Baloch people live in absolute poverty. The Balochi language and culture have been suppressed in classic colonialist style. Moreover, the economies of colonies have always been extractive in nature as "the natural resources of the colony are extracted, taken in raw form to the mother country, where they are processed into finished products."²² In fact, cultural imperialism is another weapon. Punjabi supremacists believe that, " they have a sacred duty to 'civilise' the Balochs".²³ Accordingly, they have imposed an alien language, Urdu, on the Balochi-speaking people. Moreover, Pakistan has ordered that Urdu is the compulsory language of instruction in Baloch educational institutions.

Role of Central government

No central government of India did not pay much attention to Northeast Indian region. By the Indian constitution, the people of Northeast India have been considered as 'tribe'²⁴ through which the indigenous people perceive that they have been underestimated by the state. This helps to create " boundaries between Northeast Indian people and other people of India."²⁵ Although the Northeast people demanded more autonomy from the central government, all the government tried to "divert attention through various ways and use the Northeast people simply for election benefit."²⁶ Major Raman argues that vote bank politics translated this instability into conflict and the easy available of weapon added violence to the disputes.²⁷ This Creates the feeling that Northeast India and its people are being dominated politically - that is often called as " Colonial type of ruling towards Northeast India."²⁸

Balochistan, the most deprived province of Pakistan is ignored by federal government. The crimes against humanity are still happening in Balochistan, despite Pakistan's transition to democratic government. Baloch human rights groups report that the kidnapping and torture of peaceful, lawful Baloch activists continues unchecked. Indeed, the Pakistani government has admitted that "in 2009 over 1,100 Baloch people were seized by the security forces and disappeared."²⁹ Just like Israel's settlement programme on the West Bank, the central government of Pakistan has tried to colonize Balochistan. Moreover, "the government encourages Punjabis, the largest and dominant ethnic group in Pakistan, to move to the region."³⁰ The aim is to make the Baloch people a minority in their own homeland. The gas company that "exploits and

controls the gas fields is a 'federal government controlled company'.³¹ And Balochistan gets minimum share of the revenues generated. The Sui Gas case can be quoted as a classic illustration of economic exploitation of Balochistan by central government. However, the Pakistani government often tolerates the Taliban, on the grounds that, "its presence acts as a second force to crush the Baloch people and weaken their struggle for independence".³² In other words, the Taliban are used as a proxy force by Pakistani government.

Foreign Intervention

History reveals that an insurgency cannot be continued long without foreign assistance. The case of the Northeast India is not an exception. China wholeheartedly supports to the separatist insurgencies in Northeast India to reduce the Indian influence over the region. In fact, China "has promoted all insurgent groups in the Northeast to demand secession from India, making the environment very unstable".³³ It is claimed by India that during the Naga insurgencies, "insurgents were trained by the Chinese and Pakistani Intelligence".³⁴ Moreover, arms and aids are given to insurgent groups like NNC, MNF, PLA etc. which creates difficulty for the Indian government to stop the rebels, leading recurring conflicts. Although Bangladesh refuses the claim of link with rebels of Northeast, India blames Bangladesh "for providing weapons, and operating training camps in Bangladesh for the insurgent groups".³⁵

Though internal issues might act as catalysts to inflame the situation but the root cause is interference in internal affairs of Balochistan. The government of Pakistan has accused that, "India, Iran, Afghanistan, and the U.S. are involved to strengthen the Baloch insurgency".³⁶ It is argued, "the resource of rich Balochistan is in the eye of these powers who have ambition to explore new energy resources for their better future".³⁷ In one of the report of metaexistence organization, it has been reported that Washington favors the creation of 'Greater Balochistan', and has promised to "provide them with military equipment and a base in Afghanistan".³⁸ Although Indian writers argues, "India does not have a rationale to support an insurgency in Balochistan"³⁹, but Pakistan sees Indian involvement to weaken its power and influence. Alongside India and Iran are also behind the violence. It is true that these two countries "do not want Gwadar (a port of Pakistan) to emerge as a rival to Chabahar port, which the Indians are developing in Iran as a gateway to Central Asia".⁴⁰

Media Coverage

Malcolm X. says, "The media is the most powerful entity on earth. They have the power to make the innocent feel guilty and the guilty innocent and that's the power. Because, they control the minds of the mass."⁴¹ It is true that media can play both positive role mitigating ethnic conflicts and negative role fostering the escalation of ethnic conflict. In the case of Northeast India, media played a negative role making biased reporting on "secession to autonomy, movement against illegal immigrants, ethnic conflicts and the perceived sense of isolation from mainstream India which resulted in violence and mass mobilization."⁴² Sometimes, media presents fake news which promotes the escalation of ethnic conflicts. In fact, the politicians of Northeast India use these fake news to gain their narrow purpose. For example, The Northeast Today published a fake news in 2013, " more than 5 million illegal Bangladeshi people are staying in Assam and Tripura."⁴³ In fact, based on this fake news about 40,000 Bengali (both Hindu and Muslim) citizenships have been taken away as they are labeled as illegal Bangladeshi migrants. This is how Northeast Indian media are creating ethnic tensions among the ethnic groups.

In the constitution of Pakistan, Article 19 states that every citizen shall have the right to freedom of speech and expression and there shall be freedom of press⁴⁵. Balochistan is "the most dangerous province in Pakistan for journalists with 31 killings since 2007."⁴⁶ The ruling elite treat local media as a threat, not an asset. Media coverage on Balochistan continues to diminish or is suppressed. Journalists and media in

Balochistan face threats and harassment from insurgent groups as well as state agencies. The mainstream media is unusually quiet about Balochistan. It is unfortunate that the media, particularly "private TV channels, is disseminating misleading information about Balochistan, distorting its true picture."⁴⁷ Pakistani political analyst Adman Aamir says, "...profit-driven corporate media of Pakistan doesn't earn much revenue from Balochistan and that's why it has no interest in giving converge to Balochistan which has become a news desert."⁴⁸

Conclusion

Both Balochistan and Northeast India are important to broader regional peace and security for Pakistan and India. Therefore, it should be accorded more attention in academic and policy discourse. While the Baloch and Northeast Indian insurgencies will remain active in the medium term, its consequences can be mitigated. Genuine development in these two provinces and an end to the harsh repression of Baloch and Northeast Indian nationalists would be a start. These policies may not overcome the deep-seated antipathies of Baloch and Northeast Indian rebels, but they will ensure the conflict remains limited. Moreover, both India and Pakistan would be well advised to avoid inciting the conflict. Failure to do so could have serious repercussions for India-Pakistan and their South Asian neighbors.

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