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# Book Reviews

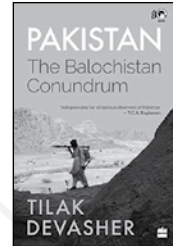
## *Pakistan: The Balochistan Conundrum*

**Tilak Devasher**

New Delhi: Indian Council of World Affairs and  
HarperCollins Publishers India (2019)

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Balochistan, a multi-ethnic region, with 44 per cent of the land area is undoubtedly the largest Pakistani province. Sharing two-thirds of Pakistan's coastline, 40 per cent of the trade transits and 180,000 sq. km exclusive economic zone which lies untapped, gives enough reason for this area to be a zone of future explorations and conflicts.

Tilak Devasher's authored book, *Pakistan: The Balochistan Conundrum* (New Delhi: ICWA & HarperCollins 2019), showcases the complexities of this province which starts from it being amongst the earliest civilisations of the world dating to 4,000 BC, to the present-day scenario wherein it is fraught with conflict and hostility ranging from enduring insurgency, sectarian violence, secessionism, terrorism and human rights violations. Despite its strategic location, Balochistan has not come into the limelight of either the journalists or the academia and strategic community at large. There have been very few books written on this subject. The author's intention of removing the cover of secrecy of this region is indeed laudable and praiseworthy, but by and large it comes across as a play-safe book catering to the readers in both India and Pakistan. Though a must read for those who study and follow the developments in South Asia and Pakistan in particular.

Tilak Devasher's professional career in the Research and Analysis Wing for over twenty years helped him develop a deep interest in the security issues and concerns of India's neighbourhood, Pakistan and Afghanistan in particular. His posting in Pakistan certainly lends credence to his study. Currently, he is a member of the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB).

The launch of the book is correctly timed or perhaps it was more of a coincidence that after the abrogation of Article 370 on August 5, 2019 by the Government of India, there was much noise and news about the future of this region. Hence, a timely and fascinating which gives an in-depth and an interesting insight into the genesis of Balochistan conflict by narrating not only the historical facts and figures but also the varied ethnic, sectarian, secessionist and militant complexities. Abounds not only with numerous data, narratives, anecdotes, but also repetitive arguments in most of the chapters which makes it a tiresome read at certain places. For example, the author has written about the Baloch alienation a number of times. In fact, the word alienation has been used 33 times in the book. Punjabi domination or Punjabi fascism is also an established fact which is overplayed and reflected in the governance or rather misgovernance of this region. Balochis alienation and resentment is well-established and its footprints can be seen in the Pakistan Army as well, which is the most important institution in the country. "It is the Army and arms that rule... There is no place for any other community in this government, be it the Baluch, the Sandhi's, the Afghans or the Bengalis ... total Punjabi Fascism rules supreme everywhere."<sup>1</sup>

A detailed and in-depth analysis of the faultlines of this region has been attempted, but a possible roadmap ahead would have tremendously added to the merit of the book. Moreover, the author himself admits in the preface about the mismatch in data and statistics due to the unavailability of the same. "Unfortunately, no two sets of statistics on the same issue match, hence, I have tried to use the best available and at places, have also

given variations to enable the reader to make an informed judgement.”<sup>2</sup> Correctly and aptly titled *The Balochistan Conundrum*, Conundrum means confusing and a difficult problem, Balochistan is too large and strategically very important province for Pakistan to loosen its grip over. The state is trying to resolve a serious political issue militarily. It will remain a perplexing problem and a festering sore for Pakistan in times to come.

The canvas of the book is spread into six main parts, with about three subsections in each part. Starting from the first part, titled as *An Ancient Civilization*, the author begins by discussing the land, people, geography, demography and the strategic importance of the province. The fact that Balochistan covers almost half of the land area of Pakistan while accounting for just 6 per cent of the country’s population is a stark reminder that more attention needs to be given to its geographical and demographic peculiarities to understand the province’s economic and social development. The main resources of the province are its geography and strategic location but this is also its Achilles heel, i.e., the skewed land to population ratio.<sup>3</sup>

The history of Balochistan till its accession to Pakistan is covered under the next section, titled *Times Gone By*, wherein the author questions the legitimacy of the accession of the Baloch state of Kalat to Pakistan. Most of the Balochi’s believe that the Khan of Kalat was forced to sign the instrument of accession with Pakistan, therefore it was illegal and the people felt betrayed and cheated. The author uses the expression “stab in the back” as Jinnah who was Khan’s lawyer had argued the case for Kalat’s independence from the British, but once the British left, Jinnah became Governor General of Pakistan, and forced the accession of Kalat to Pakistan, betraying the trust reposed in him.

Part three titled *The Roots of Alienation* focuses on exploitation in the political, administrative, economic, social and legal domains; even the most important institution, the Pakistan Army, has only a few hundred

Baloch in the entire Pakistan Army. The famous Baloch Regiment has no Baloch in it.<sup>4</sup> Under-representation in Army, bureaucracy and polity coupled with dismal social economic indicators, only prove the apathy towards this region. For instance, Balochistan was the sole provider of gas to Pakistan for about a decade and a half, but no gas was supplied to this region for nearly three decades till 1982. The town of Dera Bugti itself was supplied with gas only in the mid-1990s, forty years after gas was discovered in the district.<sup>5</sup>

Gwadar and CPEC projects are studied in the fourth part, titled *Chinese Gambit*. Whether Gwadar becomes a new silk route nexus or not is tied to Pakistan's own struggle against becoming a failed state, argues Robert Kaplan.<sup>6</sup> Here interesting facts were given like the floating of Yuan as a legal tender by the Chinese officials in Islamabad on November 20, 2017, which was not agreed upon. This chapter reveals the exclusion of Balochi people in the planning, execution, employment opportunities both in the Gwadar port and the CPEC projects. Chief Sardar Akhtar Mengal's deep anguish is seen in the statement Baloch feel threatened by the project. As the Balochistan National Party-M (BNP-M) chief Sardar Akhtar Mengal put it: "The rights of Baloch people cannot be protected and the dream of a prosperous Balochistan cannot come true unless the control of Gwadar port is handed over to the province."<sup>7</sup>

Excessive human rights violations, enforced disappearances, mass murders, mass graves and relentless persecution of Balochi people, with the judiciary and media also playing to it, is highlighted in part five. This is the most distressing aspect of the situation, so much so that it began to be known as the "Pakistan's dirty little war."<sup>8</sup> Deccan Walsh, in an article in the *Guardian* wrote, "The bodies surface quietly, like corks bobbing up in the dark. They come in two's and three's, a few times a week, dumped on desolate mountains or empty city roads, bearing the scars of great cruelty. Arms and legs are snapped; faces are bruised and swollen. Flesh is sliced with knives or punctured with drills; genitals are

singed with electric prods. In some cases the bodies are unrecognizable, sprinkled with lime or chewed by wild animals. All have a gunshot wound in the head.”<sup>9</sup> The subsection on Judiciary reveals that though the legal system has been wanting action on ground they have been only verbally admonishing the state agencies, for example, on March 1, 2012 the Supreme Court reprimanded the intelligence agencies by telling them that they were not above the law.<sup>10</sup> While commenting on the role of the intelligence agencies in Balochistan, he said, “You are an arsonist. You have set Balochistan on fire.”<sup>11</sup>

Even the media is not spared, in the chilling words of an analyst, Raza Rumi, “Not being dead is a victory in today’s Balochistan if you are a journalist. Worse, there is little or no hope of prosecuting the killers, let alone sentencing them. Most deaths of journalists go unpunished as a norm. This is the price our media has to pay for keeping the torch alive.”<sup>12</sup>

The last part covers the current insurgency with focus on the separatist challenges, response of government and response of the army under the heading, *Enduring Insurrection*. The author divides the Baloch Nationalist movement into two categories, the moderates and the separatists. Elucidating on the changing dynamics of the conflict from the 1970s when it was limited to tribal pockets, lacking any mass participation, to the 1990s when it transformed into a nationalist movement. It was Pakistan State’s repressive response that radicalised most elements of the nationalist movement and the ordinary Baloch is becoming convinced that there is no political solution but the gun is the only way.<sup>13</sup> Baloch women and children too have now become part of the insurgency movement. Even the bordering areas of Iran and Afghanistan having Balochi population are getting affected.

The author poses many pertinent questions but the answers to those remain elusive even after reading the complete book. Balochistan is a treasure land with 1,80,000 sq. km exclusive untapped economic zone, an area of future explorations and brimming conflict. The writer correctly

writes that even after seventy years of independence, Balochistan has been described as an *Edgy Place*, a boiling cauldron of ethnic, sectarian, secessionist and militant violence which is threatening to boil over at any time. Has the time come now, I ask?

While reading the book, it came across very vividly that the Balochis are averse to mixing religion with politics, but then why is Pakistan using religion (under the garb of Islamisation) to curb Baloch Nationalism? The author does not explain why religion is being used as a countermeasure for a society which the author himself mentions in the section, *On Religion*; that historically speaking, the Baloch always have had a more secular and pluralistic view on religion than their neighbours. “It is not by chance that the Baloch enjoy the unenviable reputation of being ‘bad Muslims.’” While they accept Islam as an important facet of their life conditioning their existence, they do not see it as the most important part of their identity and have not accepted the ascendancy of religion over sociocultural values. As observed by Nina Swidler, “... religion does not distinguish Baloch identity.”<sup>14</sup>

The author mentions the varied and complex narratives of the people of Balochistan, which find their expression in the form of ethnic conflicts, sectarianism, secessionism and militant violence, but he fails to give the constituents of each one of these factors separately. A roadmap as to how to resolve these burning issues is missing in the book. Furthermore, if the sociological and anthropological narratives and evidences had been studied in greater details, perhaps then an insight into the resolution of conflicts could also have been provided.

The Balochi diaspora fears of being turned into a minority in one’s own land, the issue of enforced disappearances or extra-judicial abductions, kill and dump policies of the Pakistan Army is also highlighted in the book, but the redressal mechanism, policy options and analysis is not addressed at all. The abysmally low record of social indicators was reflected in the World Bank report of 2008

where it states that this province has Pakistan's most anaemic growth record, worst infrastructure, worst water crisis, and weakest fiscal base. The poor economic performance leads to poor living standards. Balochistan has the highest poverty—along with NWFP (now KPK), lowest social indicators, and, in parts of the province, the weakest state institutions.”<sup>15</sup> Amongst these social indicators, the psychological welfare of the people should also have been looked into.

Even when the economic factors are taken into consideration, the average Balochi is twice as poor as an average Punjabi, Pashtun or Hazara resident of this province. Moreover, exclusion of Balochis in the economic projects like the Gwadar and the CPEC has only increased their alienation. Despite being the sole provider of gas for the entire Pakistan for about a decade and a half, it did not have gas for its own consumption till the year 1982, almost three decades later. This highlights the neglect their province was given by successive Pakistani establishments. Even the control of Gwadar port is not handed to the Balochis and 91 per cent of the revenue is being given to China. Gwadar project had led to one of the biggest land scams in Pakistan history, a cover story under the title “The Great Land Robbery,” was covered in the 2008 issue of *The Herald*, a Karachi-based investigative magazine.<sup>16</sup>

The book reveals greed for more monetary benefits which made Pakistani authorities divert the CPEC route for at least 400 km inside Punjab to reap the financial as well as political benefits. It is economic exploitation under the garb of development. There was no working group on CPEC formed even at the provincial level, which could highlight the interests of the Balochi people. CPEC is no different than East India Company, the author rightly states that instead of game changer the CPEC signifies game over. The water crisis is also looming large but the government's response as usual is to turn a blind eye to the basic ontological needs of the people of this province.

Intra state rivalry of Punjab vs. Balochistan is explicitly mentioned. For Punjabis it is unthinkable that a Baloch with less than 6% should have special claims to 44 per cent of land whereas the Balochis are the masters of their own destiny or at least this is what they believe in. Punjabi fascism, enforced displacements and kill and dump policies of the Pakistan army is repeatedly mentioned in the book. The author could have mentioned the intra tribal and the inter-tribal rivalry as well to completely understand the tribal dynamics and their interests and grievances. Had the Pakistani government done an in-depth analysis of the same, perhaps the conflict would not have been carried on for so long.

Some pertinent questions remain unanswered. Why Baloch insurgents have started targeting Baloch politicians both inside and outside? Why the control of the Gwadar port has not been handed to the Balochis? It is estimated that half a million white collar Chinese would reside in this region by 2023, is it not the beginning of Chinese colonisation? Economic exploitation or development have different meaning for a Balochi and a Punjabi. Will insurgency dissipate with economic development and improvement in social indicators? Have the Balochis ever been called for any informal or a formal meeting with the establishment to the redressal of their grievances? The author correctly writes that this is Pakistan's dirty little war replete with massive human rights violations and the greatest murder mysteries ever known in human history.

Politically and socially, the Baloch believe that their secular democratic mindset is not compatible with the religious and dictatorial behaviours of the state's ruling elite.<sup>17</sup> Having sustained insurgency for over a decade, Balochistan insurgency has developed a momentum of its own now. Pakistan Military force alone will not be able to break Baloch resistance movement. Every insurgency has a life cycle. What about the Balochi resistance movement? How long will it carry on?

The author correctly assesses that a military solution is not a long-term solution, a just solution is required. A solution that puts the



Balochi interests in the centre rather than the resources of the province. Failure to do so will surely exacerbate the crisis in Balochistan with dire consequences for Pakistan.

The author uses the terms nationalism and insurgency of the Balochis distinctly and separately, aren't they overlapping in this case? Is there a dividing line between the two? It is not possible to clearly demarcate between these two terms and their narratives. Will this threaten the cohesiveness and integrity of Pakistan? These are a few questions which need to be addressed. Is there any meeting ground between the mutually opposing narratives of the Pakistani state on the one hand and the Balochi nationalists on the other?

The book certainly lacks a rigorous framework of foreign policy analysis, especially questions about how do we factor in India. What will be the roadmap ahead? Epistemologically this work cannot be considered to be a work of scholarship but a narrative based on scholastics. Had the information, statistical data and facts collected also been converted into actionable intelligence for assisting the policymakers in formulating a prospective policy, then surely the book would have earned rich dividends and accolades. The book does not touch on these very important aspects at all and an analysis into this would have certainly given a holistic perspective to the Balochistan conundrum. The roots of the problem lie in Pakistan's failure to acknowledge and accommodate its ethnic diversity, economic disparities and provincial autonomy.<sup>18</sup> All in all, the book certainly lifts the veil of secrecy that Pakistan has imposed on this province since decades.

**Jyoti M. Pathania**

## Notes

1. Tilak Devasher, *Pakistan: The Balochistan Conundrum* (New Delhi: ICWA & HarperCollins, 2019). See the Preface, p. xxiii.

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2. Ibid., p. xvi.
3. Ibid., p. xxxi.
4. Ibid., p. 112.
5. Ibid., p. 128.
6. Ibid., p. 156.
7. Ibid., p. 156.
8. Ibid., p. 199.
9. Ibid., p. 198.
10. Ibid., p. 215.
11. Ibid., p. 215.
12. Ibid., p. 217.
13. Ibid., p. 239.
14. Ibid., p. 38.
15. World Bank, "Pakistan–Balochistan Economic Report: From Periphery to Core," Report No. 40345, May 2008, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/8082>, 4.
16. Tilak Devasher, *Balochistan: The Pakistan Conundrum* (New Delhi: ICWA and HarperCollins, 2019), pp. 169-70.
17. Ibid., p. 284.
18. Ibid., p. 286.

