

BOOK REVIEW - BALOCHISTAN IN THE CROSSHAIRS OF HISTORY

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Balochistan in the Crosshairs of History. Sandhya Jain. New Delhi: KW Publishers Pvt Ltd, 2021. 332 pages.

The story of Balochistan is steeped in depredation, treachery and pillage. This region has remained, for much of its existence, on the sidelines of history. Its ethnic population has been struggling for autonomy and equity for several decades in the face of regional and global neglect and, sadly for India, it has been allowed to recede from global focus into oblivion. Sandhya Jain's book entitled, "*Balochistan in the Crosshairs of History*", endeavours, quite successfully at that, to narrate the story of Balochistan dispassionately, and recounts the tribulations of a proud people as they strive for a better future. The book explores the roots of the schisms in Balochistan, based on historical evidence and attempts to identify the core reasons for the Baloch nationalist movement, which continues to this day. It traces the extraordinary struggle of the people of Balochistan and the brutally punitive response by successive governments of Pakistan. The author notes the rapacious exploitation of the region's natural resources which have exacerbated its dismal socio-economic circumstances. China's vested interests in Pakistan, especially in Gwadar, have also been examined in the book, while highlighting the contours of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The book is divided in six chapters. Jain begins her narrative from the remarkable point in time when the Indian sub-continent was at the cusp of freedom and many erstwhile princely states were frantically negotiating with Nehru, Jinnah, and Mountbatten, to preserve their interests as best as they could. Among these rulers was Ahmad Yar Khan, the Khan of Kalat, who wanted an independent State. Much of the first chapter of the book describes the failure of the Khan to achieve his goal of freedom, leading eventually, to his forced accession to Pakistan. The second chapter is relatively short and traces the Baloch identity, describing their language, music, literature, religion and demography. In the third chapter, Jain presents a chronology of five distinct periods of insurgency, beginning with the first Baloch resistance movement of 1948. In the next chapter, the author writes about how the region's natural resources, particularly coal and gas – Balochistan holds about seventy percent of Pakistan's proven gas reserves – were exploited by the Pakistani State. In the fifth chapter, the author examines the implementation of the ambitious China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) with specific focus on Balochistan. She has carried out an analysis of the Gwadar deep-sea port and concludes that China's interest in this project might be more to do with its strategic intent than merely good economics.

Here, however, her research could have done with some more depth. The last chapter, “Multipolar World vs Multipolar Asia”, is a brief account of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) vis-à-vis India’s neighbourhood policy and the SAGAR vision.

The perceived sense of injustice, isolation and denial, that pervades in the collective Baloch conscious, is a leit motif of the book, and she makes a compelling case in support of Baloch nationalism. This central idea is bolstered with data on the region’s abysmal socio-economic indicators, incorporating, amongst other inequities, the forced disappearances and targeted killings of Baloch nationalist leaders like Akbar Bugti. In recent times, the government of Pakistan has taken steps to assuage Baloch sentiments and has also commissioned some developmental projects. Yet one wonders whether there is really a ray of hope at the end of this tunnel.

The book explores the distinct identity of the Baloch people, spread over, areas of Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan, each with their own distinct language and culture, which separated them from the mainstream in Pakistan (as indeed was the case in Iran and Afghanistan, too) and has prevented their integration. It explores the contours of Baloch nationalism that began with resentment in the nineteen forties, became a resistance in the late nineteen fifties, and, eventually transformed into armed rebellion – a situation that exists to this day.

The author has argued that Afghanistan has had a significant influence on Balochistan in the past and writes that the future of the latter will, once again, be determined by events in Afghanistan. She surmises, with remarkable prescience, that the Doha talks of February 2020 “*could topple the Ghani regime*” (p. 219). The immediate impact of the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan is already palpable in South Asia. The medium to long-term effect on Balochistan, as suggested by Jain, will be profound and this offers an area worthy of academic inquiry. The migration of the Taliban to Balochistan following the US invasion of Afghanistan altered the region’s demography and also made it a crucial exit point for the lucrative opium traffic from Helmand, Nimroz and Kandahar. It remains to be seen whether, after Taliban’s return to power, the flow of drug traffic from Afghanistan would continue towards Balochistan.

Jain explains Gwadar’s strategic importance for China in the latter’s aspiration to be a “two-ocean power”. She also documents the land-grabbing by Pakistan’s military in Gwadar and the devastating effect on local fishermen that followed China’s presence in the region. Another striking observation made by the author relates to the manner in which Balochistan has largely been deprived of the benefits that the CPEC promised to bring to the region. Apart from these issues, Balochistan’s relevance in the larger context of a multipolar world, and the Indo-Pacific in particular, is moot. Thus, it is hard to contextualise the last chapter, ‘Multipolar World vs Multipolar Asia’ – that dilates on the BRI and the global response to this initiative, the potential of the Renminbi as an international reserve currency, China’s quest for strategic outposts in the Indian Ocean, India’s neighbourhood policy, and the Indo-Pacific – within the ambit of the book’s unifying theme. On the other hand, the impact of China’s presence on the people of Balochistan has been a subject of contemporary discussion and requires greater study. Another possible area of research is perhaps the port of Gwadar, which putatively offers immense advantages to China and Pakistan.

There are relatively few contemporary works on Balochistan and most of those that do exist, follow two main themes – Baloch history and Baloch nationalism. This book sheds new light on the subject with an artful interweaving of strands from history, sociology, ethnicity, economy and contemporary geopolitics. Inclusion of a map, indicating the various sub-regions and districts as well as the terrain which are frequently referred to in the book, would certainly have made it an even more interesting read.

The author claims to make “*a modest attempt to explain the complex factors at work in the painful saga of the Baloch people*”, and eminently succeeds in the task that she set for herself. More importantly, the book is a tribute to the enduring struggle of a people denied their rightful aspirations of identity and equity at the hands of a repressive State. It should find a place on the reading list of students of South Asian history and geopolitics, advocates of international human rights and also those who wish to study Pakistan’s internal dynamics. Others will find the book delightfully satisfying as it leisurely navigates a slice of history and captures a wide perspective of a little-known people. As a scholarly work, the book is well-referenced and would be a valuable addition to libraries.

About the Reviewer:

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