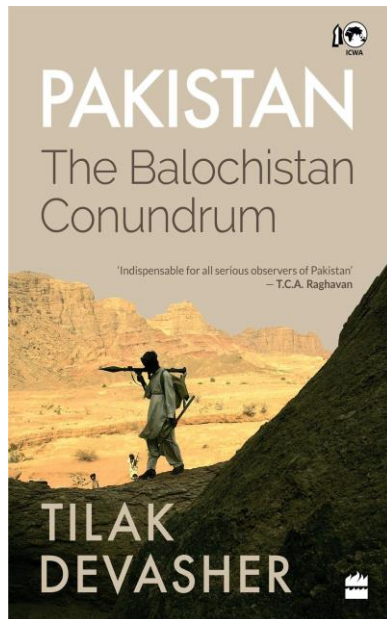


Book Review: *Pakistan: The Balochistan Conundrum*



Tilak Devasher, formerly the Special Secretary of the Cabinet Secretariat Government, is an eminent author with three acclaimed novels under his belt, *Pakistan: Courting the Abyss* (December 2016), *Pakistan: At the Helm* (July 2018), and *Pakistan: The Balochistan Conundrum* (July 2019). With a penchant for the issues in Pakistan and Afghanistan, he specialises in the developments in the South Asian region. Currently, a member of the National Security Advisory Board, as well as a Consultant with the Vivekananda International Foundation, Devasher has widely written on security issues in South Asia, including articles for magazines, newspapers and think tanks. He regularly contributes to The Indian Express,

The Economic Times, The Tribune, and sometimes also India Today. During his professional career, his focus was on security issues pertaining to India and its neighbourhood, for which he served in pertinent locations such as Jammu and Kashmir, Delhi, and even a few places abroad.

With his practical observations gathered while serving in such locations, alongside his extensive research on the region, Devasher writes compelling texts which offer a deep-dive into the nature and history of the tensions brewing in South Asia. His analyses of every contentious issue go to the very core of the subject at hand and unpack it critically, exposing the complexity of the issue with the utmost ease. In his most recent book, *Pakistan: The Balochistan Conundrum*, Devasher employs the same method in order to examine the peculiar situation in the largely unscrutinised province of Balochistan.

Balochistan, despite being an extremely volatile and exploited province, is a region which is not given its time in the spotlight when it comes to the discourse on Pakistan and the larger South Asian region. Devasher's book acts as a catalyst for breaking this pattern, providing a comprehensive insight into the plight of the people of Balochistan. By furnishing an extensive account of the history of the region and its people, Devasher ensures that he is leaving no stone unturned in the pursuit of decoding the contributing factors of Balochistan's alienation. The core argument that Devasher tries to make in his book is that the province of

Balochistan has been systematically discriminated against and made to feel alienated by the entire state of Pakistan. The policies and practices issued towards the province and its people have ensured that the province remains undeveloped, backward and alienated, factors which are only made worse by the apathy of the rest of Pakistan.

Devasher offers a quite unwonted approach to the already shallow discourse by beginning his analysis from the origin of the region as a province of the Pakistani state. Tracing back the inception of the entrenched Baloch alienation in Pakistan, Devasher discusses how the exploitation first emerged with the forced accession of Kalat to Pakistan in 1948. The princely state of Kalat was set to become an independent state. However, due to its strategic location, Balochistan's fate of being oppressed was sealed. According to Devasher, British documents, hitherto unavailable, stated Balochistan to be a suitable location for the British Garrison. Hence, Kalat had been determined by the British as a future base for their activities in the region. Soon, however, the British realised that while Balochistan is strategically located, it is quite weak and is also not so willing to accommodate the British. Thus, a decision to situate a base in the more welcoming Pakistan was agreed upon. Moreover, the Great Game between Tsarist Russia and the Britain Empire in the Indian Sub-continent made Pakistan acquire heightened importance in terms of the British defence plans for the Middle East and the Indian Ocean regions.

It was clear that Pakistan was to be utilised strategically by the British. However, in order to do that, it was required to increase the geographic and strategic viability of Pakistan and the only way to do so was to ensure Balochistan's accession to Pakistan. This spelt disaster for Balochistan. By the twelfth century, the Baloch had already started developing a sense of nationalism and community culture. The forced accession of Kalat to Pakistan was a devastatingly unforgettable move by the British and Pakistan, for which the anger and hostility are still brewing in the hearts of the Baloch.

The accession assured the alienation and mistreatment of the Baloch in Pakistan. According to Devasher, the feelings of alienation experienced by the Baloch have only exacerbated by an eerie colonial conduct displayed by the ethnically dominant Punjabis, who are also largely in control of the Central Government. Many Baloch believe that due to the centralised nature of the federation, small provinces like Balochistan are underrepresented. The very tip of the iceberg is the lack of Baloch representatives on the higher rungs of both the central and state governments. For 30 years, between 1947 and 1977, there were only four ethnic Baloch members in the Central cabinets. Moreover, until the 1990s all provincial governments with somewhat of a Baloch representation could not hold office for more than

three years in total. Due to this, it led to a belief that the Punjabi establishment was not going to let any Baloch government compete.

Devasher reveals how the Baloch also face bureaucratic underrepresentation in Pakistan. Out of the 830 civil services posts, ethnic Baloch occupied only 181 in the year of 1979. Even when it came to the constitution of the police, the Baloch were scarce in number. All high-ranking officers, as well as three-fourths of the entire police force, were non-Baloch. Despite the promise made by the Zia-ul-Haq regime to increase the representation of the Baloch in accordance with their percentage in Pakistan's population in 1980, hardly any Baloch officer was employed as a government servant. Even today, most senior positions in Balochistan are held by officials from Punjab or other provinces.

A very damaging phenomenon has further allowed non-Baloch officials to monopolise such positions; the domicile clause. According to an interview of the former chief minister of Balochistan, Dr Abdul Malik, a fake domicile racket, wherein doctored identity documents are issued by some non-Baloch, has been operating for years. Experts claim that this racket is apparently a ploy to ensure that the Baloch are prevented from developing their economic status. In May 2016, a review by the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) of 295,457 government officials revealed that at least 45,000 officials held doctored or incorrect ID numbers, enabling them to hold multiple jobs simultaneously, engage in work despite being below the age of eighteen at the time of appointment, holding positions reserved for the Baloch, among others. Due to this, very few posts are held by Balochistan-domiciled officers. The rest are occupied by non-Baloch, especially those in the upper echelons of civil services, pointing to the essentially negligible voice the Baloch have in the policymaking process even in their own province.

The alienation experienced by the Baloch is not just restricted to political and bureaucratic underrepresentation. It finds reverberations even in the military. Until 1929, there was not a single Baloch in the armed forces, leading to an uprising in the Baloch Regiment. Despite such efforts, their representation in the army remains abysmal. The Baloch Regiment still does not have any Baloch in it, and the entire Pakistan Army in totality only consists of a few hundred Baloch. Despite the increase in the recruitment quota from Balochistan, ethnic Baloch do not find space in the armed forces for such quotas are on a provincial basis, leading to most recruits being Pashtun rather than ethnic-Baloch. To intensify their plight, there is the predicament of encroaching cantonments which cannot be taxed by provincial governments. This has created a sense of colonisation among the Baloch who feel like the cantonments, acting as parallel governments by themselves, are usurping their traditional lands. To make

matters worse, the paramilitary force, Frontier Corps have been actively engaging in the extortion and humiliation of the Baloch, only worsening their animosity towards the state.

Even the sphere of education is not spared when it comes to rendering the Baloch alienated. The system is entirely dysfunctional, the access to education is essentially non-existent in the face of that of other provinces, and standards of educational progress are extraordinarily low. The subpar quality of education, as well as high rates of illiteracy, are proving to be a fundamental cause behind the backwardness of Balochistan relative to other provinces. A report released by the Academy for Educational Planning and Management (AEPAM) revealed that more than 1.8 million children in Balochistan were not enrolled in school. Balochistan took the crown standing at 70%, the highest percentage of out-of-school children. Examining the same figures for the education of girls, the devastation is palpable. In an already alienated Balochistan, women and girls face increased discrimination. The percentage of girls out of school is extremely high relative to that of boys, which is attributed to the fact that the number of high schools for girls is so scarce, that most are left with no choice but to give up their education after middle school.

A very peculiar issue that Balochistan is facing is of ghost schools. While government records showed a movement of funds to various schools for the maintenance of their infrastructure, as well as the salaries of the teachers, the former minister of education, Abdul Rahim Ziaratwal revealed that these schools did not actually exist. There are nearly 900 ghost schools in Balochistan alone, with 300,000 “registered” students. Not only are the Baloch being deprived of access to education, but the extremely worrying figures are being covered up by fabricated data. Devasher points out how this pattern is prevalent even in higher education. Calling it a “stepmotherly treatment”, Devasher details how even the Higher Education Committee (HEC), the regulatory body of higher education of Pakistan, has given the province the short end of the stick. He gives a point by point explanation of how HEC scholarships and grants accorded to the province of Balochistan severely fall short of the constitutionally mandated quota which stands at 6%. The funds awarded to Balochistan for research and development in the three years of 2015-18 were a meagre 1%, while more than 70% was accorded to Punjab. The contrast is clear as day.

Another major source of resentment for the Baloch is the fact that as of now, the only development occurring in the province is in the name of material things. Islamabad’s focus is solely on roads, ports, dams and other such projects. The grievances of the people, however, do not seem to be one of the priorities of the federal government. Balochistan has immense potential when it comes to natural resources, but this is not being effectively tapped into. This

potential, if harnessed, can be a great source of wealth and economic growth for the province. In fact, if the fisheries, minerals, and horticulture are effectively developed, Balochistan can essentially become a zero-unemployment province. The current growth rate of Balochistan's economy, however, is exceptionally low, not nearly enough to provide education and employment opportunities to the people of the province. This only exacerbates their plight.

The economic deprivation in the province is staggering. Balochistan's economy is performing poorly which has translated into poor living standards. It has the highest rates of poverty in the country, extremely low social indicators, high unemployment rates, as well as increasing unrest. An amalgamation of all these factors has created a negative image of Balochistan in the rest of the country, in that it is viewed as an extremely backward and impoverished province.

The unemployment rate alone is a huge cause for concern. In 2012, the number of unemployed persons from Balochistan constituted 20% of the total percentage of unemployed persons in the country. Given the fact that Balochistan accounts for 6% of the total population, the unemployment rate is grossly disproportionate. It sheds even more light at the alienation of Balochistan and its people. The employment opportunities available to the Baloch are grossly insufficient. Their primary source of income has been in the agricultural sector. However, given the lack of developmental efforts in the province, that too has been affected by severe water and electricity shortages. Unemployment is running rampant. Devasher details the desperation of the people of Balochistan by depicting how, in hopes for a source of earning a livelihood, they accept jobs at much lower salaries than what they are worth. The further one reads on, the more the exploitation of the Baloch becomes enhanced and evident.

Citing the Sustainable Development Policy Institutes' Geography of Poverty figures of Balochistan (2008-2013), Devasher further elucidates how the province is among the lowest rankers in the country in every aspect pertaining to human development and well-being including, education, health, living conditions, and assets ownership. The figures revealed that within the time-frame under study, 46.2% of the population of Balochistan was living in extreme poverty, and two entire districts were below the poverty line. Nearly two dozen other districts had more than 72% of their population suffering through the same fate.

There have also been reports that suggest that state-led support programmes are biased against the poorest provinces, especially Balochistan. According to the latest data of the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP), 12% of the households in Punjab received unconditional transfers from BISP, 25% in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), 22% in Sindh, and only 13% in Balochistan. Given the fact that Balochistan has the highest poverty level, it should

have the highest coverage level. However, it receives a share only slightly higher than Punjab, a far richer province, while provinces like KPK and Sindh, which relatively fair better than Balochistan, receive a considerably higher share. This unjust treatment by the BISP towards Balochistan has continued for more than five years now.

Devasher further highlights in his book how rampant poverty, along with widespread unemployment, lack of quality education, as well as discrimination by state-led support programmes have led to serious repercussions in the province in terms of food security. Yet another report revealed that thirteen of the most undernourished districts in the country belong to Balochistan. The situation is so brutal that about two out of three households in the entirety of Balochistan cannot afford even one proper meal a day. 83% of the children in Balochistan are not only severely malnourished but also deprived of any access to education and healthcare. The situation hit an all-time low in May 2017 when the health minister of Pakistan, Mir Rehmat Baloch expressed his intent to impose a nutritional health emergency in the province. The expenditure on the healthcare infrastructure in Balochistan is essentially negligible, with no follow-through by the federal government, leading to an exacerbation of the already crippling situation.

Any inquiry into the situation of Balochistan would be incomplete without a discussion on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and its impact on the region, and Devasher does not disappoint. Gwadar is of immense strategic importance to China. Not only does it provide access to the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean, but it also is locationally strategic for China in terms of monitoring crucial sea links, as well as the activities of the Indian and American navies operating in the region. Many have even speculated that the Gwadar port would provide China with a geostrategic location to set up a naval base, ensuring China's firm footing in the region. The use of this port is also, needless to say, essential for trade especially given the fact that it gives an alternative trade route which would bypass India, allowing China to have its trade activity go undisturbed even in the case of a political strife with the country. While Pakistan has been in fervent support of the Chinese project, the public is not enthused.

Most of the public feel largely excluded from the decision-making process pertaining to the CPEC, deprived of rightful employment opportunities, and apprehensive of the motives of the federal government. A huge section of the population is suffering at the hands of this project. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is hailed as a pioneering endeavour in Pakistan which would bring prosperity to the country and aid in its upliftment. However, many experts claim that CPEC is turning out to be a "game-over" rather than a "game-changer." It is gradually bringing devastation to the entire country through its unceasing and expensive

projects which are pushing Pakistan in a debt trap. While the entire country is suffering from the repercussions, Balochistan is facing the worst of it.

Even though the project's main hub is in the province of Balochistan, on the land of the Baloch, they are not being provided with any stake in the project. There is a lot of unrest regarding the subject of the beneficiaries of the CPEC project, which is further amplifying the feelings of alienation among the Baloch. Most of the employment opportunities are also provided to Chinese workers, leaving insufficient opportunities for the people of Balochistan. The few that are employed in the project are largely unskilled labour. One of the major concerns regarding the CPEC among the Baloch is also the fear that the incursion and encroachment of an increasing number of Chinese in Gwadar would render the Baloch a minority in their own home. Having seen the Sindh being converted into a minority in their own province, the Baloch fear that their plight will only grow more dreadful if they meet the same fate.

The location of the CPEC project has been another source of agitation. The fisherman, constituting nearly 80% of the population in the region, already lost their prime fishing grounds when the Gwadar port was constructed along the east bay. However, the depredation is not limited to just that. The ongoing construction of the proposed Eastbay Express as part of the CPEC would connect the Makran coastal highway to the Gwadar port. This could lead to a serious complication, depriving the fishermen of Balochistan access to the sea entirely. The eastern port will be completely inaccessible to them, bringing absolute devastation for the community given the fact that fishing has remained a major source of income for centuries now. To make matters worse, there have been reports of trawlers of Sindh depleting fish stocks and damaging the marine ecosystem of Balochistan, which is going to be further exploited by the Chinese who are also reportedly planning on engaging in trawling to send fish back to China.

Another massive source of anxiety is the real estate speculation in Gwadar. While the locals have owned the land for centuries, they have no evidence whatsoever to prove this ownership. Given the encroachment of not only non-locals but also the Chinese caused by the CPEC project, influential actors have easily managed to bribe revenue officials and have had the land registered in their names, stripping the locals of their own properties. The locals further lost their lands since they were sold off by the government to developers from Karachi and Lahore for development and infrastructural projects. Large acres of land in Gwadar are now occupied by civilian and military bureaucrats, politicians, as well as non-local and Chinese workers. Even though land speculation has increased prices considerably, the locals are unable to benefit.

The manner in which Gwadar is developing due to the CPEC is such that it is escalating the feelings of alienation amongst the locals of the state and subsequently, of the Baloch in general. It seems difficult to see how a mega project like CPEC is going to be a game-changer for Balochistan. If anything, it is only going to worsen their plight of. However, like any other issue and/or grievance faced the Baloch, there is a serious lack of efforts to mitigate their concerns and ensure their well-being, along with the rest of the state. There is not even a working group operating at the provincial level to ensure the protection of the interests of Balochistan. CPEC is going to be of absolutely no benefit to the Baloch and will only decay it further. To drive this point home, Devasher gives figures pertaining to the distribution of profits that would be accrued from CPEC. Quoting the former chief minister, Dr Malik, Devasher explains that nearly 91% of the profits are to be siphoned off to China, with the remaining 9% resting in the hands of the federal government. Balochistan is not even going to be accorded 1% of the profits, all it will receive is simply dilapidation and ruin.

The salt in the wound is, however, the sheer ignorance and apathy of the rest of Pakistan towards Balochistan. Devasher brilliantly brings forth this detachment of the rest of the country by using examples of the knowledge of Lahoris as well as university students, about Balochistan. It was baffling to see how everyone is blissfully unaware of the ongoing events in the province. The ignorance is so pronounced that the rest of the country is absolutely oblivious to the human rights violations the Baloch are suffering from, including forced disappearances of individuals, corpses with brutal bullet and torch marks turning up after days of being missing, abductions, among others. Such apathy only heightens the feelings of alienation which have been festering in the hearts of the Baloch for years now.

These persistent feelings of alienation and the severe discrimination against the Baloch have made them disenchanted with political apparatus and the state, and they have come to foster separatist desires, ranging from demanding greater provincial authority to carrying out insurgencies calling for secession from the Pakistani state. The Baloch have also repeatedly appealed to the US and other Western powers to convince Pakistan to bring an end to the deplorable treatment of Balochistan, but they have all largely remained silent.

Devasher questions here as to how plausible it is for Balochistan to actually secede from Pakistan. He opines that considering the strategic importance, Pakistan is not going to let the province slip through its fingers so easily, exacting military oppression to keep the insurgencies and separatists at bay. Moreover, given the egregious condition of the province, Balochistan does not possess the means to secede all on its own. Devasher concludes, therefore,

that unless there is a catalyst like massive international support for Balochistan, the chances of the province seceding seem exceedingly slim.

Devasher's book objectively unpacks the intricacies of the fraught situation in Balochistan, analysing each and every aspect which goes in shaping the contemporary situation in the province. Devasher manages to bring forth, without integrating unnecessary complications, how the province of Balochistan has been internally and systematically crippled and made unable to uplift itself. The alienation which began festering among the Baloch since the forced accession of Kalat has only been exacerbated by the discriminatory behaviour on the part of the federal government. Not only is the province's full economic potential not tapped into, but the already existing issues and concerns surrounding health, education, unemployment, among others are paid no heed to by the state.

Any and every possible avenue by which the Baloch could have uplifted themselves has been stripped from them. Balochistan is only being kept in Pakistan because of its strategic importance and absolutely no efforts have been made to mitigate the alienated feelings among the locals. The province has been trapped in a vicious circle wherein they are made to feel alienated and backward, and the only sources of their upliftment are also taken away from them, causing further alienation. Pakistan is having its cake and eating it too.

Devasher's book is a pioneering effort in contributing to the literature on Balochistan and bringing awareness to the contentious condition of the province. Extremely well researched, the book presents compelling facts and figures to back up its main argument and yet, manages to not make it into simply an encyclopaedia on the province. The reader is gripped by the language and is truly able to explore and understand the deep recesses of the plight that Balochistan is going through, evoking a sense of empathy for the province. The book has also been structured as such that it manages to cover every topic under the sun pertaining to Balochistan without being too lengthy or heavy.

The sections in which the book has been divided into have great potential of being fleshed out further, perhaps even turned into further volumes, only enriching the already lacking discourse on Balochistan. The section on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor should definitely be explored further for many experts are interested in the research on BRI, and perhaps studying the impact of the CPEC on the province will spark a larger discussion among scholars, diplomats, and policymakers regarding the issue of Balochistan. All in all, this book is truly a riveting academic source on Balochistan which goes to the very heart of the Balochistan conundrum.