

The insurrection next door



BOOK REVIEW

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Tilak Devasher has already established his reputation as one of India's more knowledgeable and perceptive observers of Pakistan, thanks to his two earlier widely-acclaimed books, *Pakistan: Courting the Abyss* and *Pakistan: At the Helm*. His latest book, *Pakistan: The Balochistan Conundrum*, is about Pakistan's largest but one of the least-known provinces, Balochistan. Few in India are aware of its chequered history, its complex ethnic mosaic and the paradox of its pervasive poverty

co-existing with its abundant resources. Balochistan is also a festering wound on Pakistan's body politic, stoked by a deep and persistent alienation of its tribal communities which has also nurtured a long-standing armed insurgency, which repeated and brutal military reprisals have been unable to snuff out.

Mr Devasher has done extensive research for his book. This is reflected in the several pages of notes and references. He has used both Pakistani and international sources and this lends credibility to his assessments. Despite declaring that our neighbourhood enjoys the highest priority in our foreign policy, we have not really devoted much attention to our understanding of the underlying economic, social and cultural factors that drive the political dynamics of countries with which we share our common sub-continental space. The Indian Council of World Affairs should be

complimented for sponsoring studies such as this, which enable a deeper and more rounded discourse on our neighbours.

The author has structured the book into six thematic sections each with three chapters. The first two sections, entitled "An Ancient Civilization" and "Times Gone By", respectively, focus on the geography of Balochistan, the ethnic make-up of its people, their religious and cultural particularities and their ancient and more recent history. The province is populated by Baloch tribes but also by the Brahvi ethnic group that, curiously, is of Dravidian origin. In the north there is a substantial Pushtun population. The subsequent sections on "The Roots of Alienation" and "Relentless Persecution" contain a detailed analysis of the wellsprings of the endemic violence that has ravaged the province in an action-reaction process with which we in India are familiar. The seeds of disaffection were

sown in the cynical and violent incorporation of a hitherto independent state into Pakistan in 1948. Thereafter, the Pakistani state treated the province mainly as a source of rich resources such as natural gas and coal, to be exploited for the benefit of the Punjabi majority with almost complete neglect of the local population.

The final section, "Enduring Insurrection," explores the likelihood that the threat of secession may materialise. The author's conclusion is that given the tribal divisions that persist, the sparse and widely distributed population and the overwhelming firepower that the Pakistani Army is able to deploy, Balochistan is unlikely to emerge, like Bangladesh, as an independent entity. Iran next door also has a significant Baloch population, while neighbouring Afghanistan shares a substantial Pushtun population with Balochistan. Neither would like to support secessionist tendencies, which may impact their own ethnic communities.

The most interesting parts of Mr Devasher's book relate to the fascinating history of Balochistan. It was during the

19th century that the British as the imperial power, drew boundaries that split the Baloch and Pushtun tribes, with portions incorporated into Iran and Afghanistan, and another ruled directly by the British. A rump Khanate of Kalat survived as an independent state right up to its forcible annexation in 1948. Kalat was never included among the Indian princely states. It was recognised as an independent country in the same category as the kingdoms of Nepal and Bhutan. Jinnah appeared to recognise this status in 1947 but there is ample evidence to show that it was the British who urged him to annex it by force for their own perceived security interests. This has a parallel in British officers raising the Pakistani flag in Gilgit, claiming for their adopted country the strategically important part of Jammu & Kashmir, destined to play an important role in the Cold War that followed. Was Kalat interested in association with India? A representative of Kalat was a participant in the Constituent Assembly, which had begun meeting from December 1946, though this does not figure in the book.

Mr Devasher has an informative chapter on the port of Gwadar on the Baloch coast currently being managed by the Chinese and another on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which traverses Balochistan, north to south. His cogent analysis indicates that the economic and commercial promise of these projects is exaggerated. They do make sense from the security perspective. If CPEC is described by Pakistan as a game-changer it is mainly in terms of the security potential not because it is likely to transform the country's economic prospects. While the book is comprehensive in its coverage there is some avoidable duplication across chapters. I would have liked to see some discussion of India's posture towards Balochistan.

The reviewer is a former foreign secretary and is currently Senior Fellow CPR

THE BALOCHISTAN CONUNDRUM

Tilak Devasher

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