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<http://strategicstudyindia.blogspot.in/2016/02/lets-talk-about-baluchistan.html>

Let's talk about Baluchistan!

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2/22/2016

The Pakistani case for Kashmir no longer rests on religion; the Bengali rebellion and secession in 1971 did in that argument. It now rests upon the more exalted principle of self-determination. That is what their friends abroad and even in India wax eloquent about. The Pakistanis no longer harp about Indian perfidies in Junagadh and Hyderabad. Free elections, full integration and the sheer fact of Hindus being the major community in these two onetime princely states has put paid to that.

But Kashmir still dogs us. It is predominantly Muslim and the demand for self-determination has us confused. Isn't that what democracy is all about? But the irony is that Pakistan is the champion of self-determination when its own people do not often enjoy democratic rights. The three pillars upon which the Pakistani state rests are still Allah, Army and America. The people of Pakistan do not figure in this scheme at all. The Pakistani leaders want a diplomatic engagement with us on Jammu and Kashmir again. Their Prime Minister has once again donned the cloak of democracy that hangs outside Gen. Kiyani's bunker. But we must not shirk from talking about self-determination with them. It's a two edged sword and cuts both ways. Let's take the case of Baluchistan.

The Pakistani province of Baluchistan is a mountainous desert area of about 3.5 lakh sq.kms and has a population of over 7.5 million or about as much as Jammu and Kashmir's population. It borders Iran, Afghanistan and its southern boundary is the Arabian Sea with the strategically important port of Gwadar on the Makran coast commanding approach to the Straits of Hormuz. It also has huge oil and gas reserves.

Quetta is the capital of Baluchistan, the population here now consists of Baluch and Pashtu speaking Afghans. Like the Kurds, the Baluch are also a people ignored by the makers of modern political geography. There is also the Iranian province of Sistan and Baluchestan spread over an area of 1.82 lakh sq.kms. and with a population of over 2.5 million Baluch. Its capital is Zahedan.

Through most of their history the Baluch administered themselves as a loose tribal confederacy. The Baluch are an ancient people. In 325 BC, after his abortive India campaign, as Alexander made his way back to Babylon through the Makran Desert, his Greeks suffered greatly at the hands of marauding Baluchis. The legend has it that they originally came from near Aleppo in Syria and there is much linguistic evidence to suggest that they belong to the same Indo-European sub-group as the Persians and Kurds. They came into Islam under the shadow of the sword of Muhammed bin Qasim's conquering Arab army in 711 AD. Whatever be their origins, by 1000 AD they were well settled in their present homeland. The poet Firdausi records them in the Persian epic, the Book of Kings, thus: "Heroic Baluches and Kuches we saw/ Like battling rams all determined on war." As relatively late arrivals in the region, the Baluchis had to battle earlier occupants of the lands such as the Brahui tribes who still abound around Kalat. The Brahui language belongs to the Dravidian family of languages and is close to Tamil. The Brahui's are the only Dravidian survivors in northern India, after the Aryan invasion.

A restless people, the Baluchis naturally pushed eastwards towards the more fertile regions watered by the Indus River, but were halted by the might of the Mughals. But we still have reminders of the many Baluchi incursions in the names of the towns like Dera Ghazi Khan and Dera Ismail Khan in the Punjab and NWFP. Unlike the Dravidians of Mohen-jo-daro and Harappa who disappeared without a trace, the Brahui's made one last hurrah when they asserted their power in Kalat. By the 18th century Kalat was the dominant power in Baluchistan and the Khan of Kalat was the ruler of the entire region. But the Brahui's paid for it by getting assimilated into the majority Baluchis. Brahui language still survives in small pockets but only by just. My late father who served in British India's Defence Services Staff College at Quetta in the early 1940's would often tell me of hearing the local tribesmen serving in the Staff College speaking a language that sounded remarkably like Tamil! A few years ago, I ran into a bunch of school kids from Kalat at the National Museum in Karachi and they were amused that I knew that uru meant village, arisi meant rice and tanni meant water even to me from distant southern India.

The British first came to the region in 1839 on their way to Kabul when they sought safe passage. In 1841 they entered into a treaty with Kalat. In the wake of Lord Auckland's disastrous invasion of Afghanistan, the British annexed Sind in a mood that Mountstuart Elphinstone said was "of a bully who had been kicked in the streets and then goes home to beat the wife in revenge!" The British annexed Sind in 1843 from the Talpur Mirs, a Baluchi dynasty. On June 27, 1839 Ranjit Singh died and within ten years his great prophecy on being shown a map with

British possessions in India in “ek din sab laal ho jayega!” came to be true. After the formal surrender of the Sikhs on March 29, 1849 and the annexation of Punjab, the British now had a long border with the Baluchis. But learning from their disastrous experience with the Afghans they generally preferred to keep out of harms way and seemingly took cognizance of Baluchi assurances of the inviolability of their borders.

In 1876, the British however forced another treaty on the Baluchis and forced the Khan of Kalat to lease salubrious Quetta to them. The Khan’s writ still ran over Baluchistan, but now under the watchful but benign eye of a British minister. That the Khan of Kalat was not considered another insignificant prince was in the fact that he was accorded a 19-gun salute like the Jaipurs and Jodhpurs. With security assured and largely unfettered domestic power the Khans led lavish and often eccentric lifestyles. One Khan collected shoes, and to ensure the safety of his collection had all the left shoes locked in a deep dungeon of his fort in Kalat!

Whatever the whimsicalities of the Khans of Kalat, like the rulers of Hyderabad and Kashmir, they enjoyed the greatest degree of autonomy possible under the system established by the British as long as whimsy was within reason and not inimical to British interests. This arrangement prevailed till 1947. The urge to be independent rulers burned equally bright in all three of them. The Khan of Kalat, Mir Ahmad Yar Khan, went further than Hari Singh of Kashmir and Osman Ali Khan of Hyderabad. He declared independence, while the other two dithered and allowed events to overtake them.

Unlike in Hyderabad, it was apparent that the population largely supported the Khan. The Baluchis like the Pathans of NWFP were not too enthused with the idea of Pakistan. In the NWFP the separatist Muslim League led by Mohammed Ali Jinnah was actually rejected in elections. Yet eight months after the Khan’s assertion of independence the Pakistanis forcibly annexed Baluchistan. But Baluchi aspirations for an independent state were not quelled completely.

In 1973 a war of independence broke out in Baluchistan. Indira Gandhi was quick to provide assistance. For five long years there was total war. At its peak the Baluchis raised a force of 55000 combatants. Nearly six Pakistan Army divisions were deployed to fight them. The Pakistan Air Force was also extensively used and its Mirage and Sabre fighter jets carried out strikes all over rural Baluchistan. Widespread use of napalm has also documented by scholars like Robert Wirsing of the University of Texas and Selig Harrison. Iran too joined in the military action and Huey Cobra helicopter gunships of its Army Aviation were widely used. By the time the last pitched battle was fought in 1978 5000 Baluchi fighters and 3000 Pakistani soldiers had died. Civilian casualties were many times that. The Baluchi war for independence was crushed, but the aspirations still flicker.

Speaking at the 57th session of the Commission of Human Rights at Geneva between March 9-April 27,2001, Mehran Baluch, a prominent Baluch leader said: “Our tragedy began in 1947, immediately after the creation of Pakistan. The colonialist army of Pakistani Punjab forcibly occupied Kalat at gunpoint.” Even now a struggle continues in Baluchistan. After the killing of Akbar Khan Bugti, other leading Baluchi leaders like Sardars Attaullah Mengal and Mahmood Khan Achakzai, and Nawab Khair Baksh Marri, heads of the three great Baluch clans, have been

leading protests over the economic exploitation of the regions great natural resources to the exclusion of the local people. Marri and hundreds of his supporters are under arrest.

Till 1977 the Indira Gandhi government actively worked for the democratic aspirations of the Baluchis and Pathans. Baluchi fighters were trained in the deserts of Rajasthan. We also provided them with financial and diplomatic assistance. With Bangladesh free, Indira Gandhi reckoned that Sind, Baluchistan and Pakhtunistan should follow.

After her electoral defeat in 1977, Vajpayee as the Janata government's Foreign Minister made his first misguided and woolly-headed attempt to normalize relations with Pakistan. We now remember Lahore as his first, but that is not correct. Indian support to the various movements struggling for self-determination in Punjabi dominated Pakistan was withdrawn. The Sindhi refugee LK Advani did not protest even when the Jiye Sind movement of GM Syed was betrayed. He was quite pleased with being able to go to his hometown of Karachi and visit his old school. Vajpayee's assurances to Zia, the man who initiated the policy of "death by a thousand cuts" to destroy India, ensured that the Baluchis were forced to leave their camps in Rajasthan and all financial, military and diplomatic assistance was cut.

Even though the Janata regime did not last very long, the damage was done. The Gujral doctrine drove the final nail into that policy. We need to revisit that policy. The gates of solution to the vexed Kashmir problem lie in a another part of Pakistan.