



Religious Extremism in Xinjiang from the Prism of Indian Scholars

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Abstract

Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region is the north western part of China. The inhabitants of the region mostly comprise of different ethnic communities, which over the period started to identify with the Islamic identity, Uyghurs in particular. Post-cold war, several developments took place in the region. This paper will present the Indian perspective on the situation in Xinjiang, post-cold war. The major changes that took place in the region economically, politically and socially in the 21st century will be elaborated from the perspective of prominent Indian scholars. These scholars will include- Debasish Chaudhuri, K. Warikoo and Mahesh Ranjan Debata, who have worked on the issue of Xinjiang. Different India perspectives will be worked on to analyze the situation in Xinjiang from different angles to provide Indian perspective, holistically.

Keywords: Xinjiang, uyghur, China, religious extremism, belt and road initiative

Introduction

Xinjiang, also known as Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), is geographically located in the north-western part of People's Republic of China. The name Xinjiang literally means 'New Frontier' (Debata 2007)^[4]. It is considered as the largest province of China (1.665 million sq kms), holding on to the majority Muslim population known as Uyghurs (Warikoo 2000)^[8]. Uyghurs claim descent from the Turkic speaking migrants of Mongolia. Historically, it is accepted that the Turks originally lived in the Steppes of today's northern part of Mongolia (Debata, 2007)^[4].

Xinjiang as a region holds a very significant position in the map of China that has led to several issues, and currently, several developments for the country. Xinjiang borders the Central Asian Republics of Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in the west and north, Mongolia in the north east, Afghanistan and Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir in the south and southwest, Tibet in the south east, Russia on the north west and Pakistan on the south west (Debata 2007)^[4]. The strategic location of Xinjiang and its geographical proximity with eight countries have created geo-strategic and security issues for the region for many centuries. Xinjiang's border sharing with 8 countries provides an opportunity to forge trade and economic links to bolster its economy (Panda 2006). Xinjiang proves to be of major importance to China over other provinces because of its crucial role in the development of connectivity across the vast Eurasian plane. The three major international development corridors of the BRI that links South Asia, West Asia and Europe passes through Xinjiang. In March 2015, National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) and ministries of commerce and foreign affairs of the People's Republic of China (PRC) had nominated Xinjiang as the 'core' region for the Silk Road Economic Belt (Chaudhuri 2021)^[3].

Historical background

Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region became a part of China in 1949. Since then several policies have been

Adopted China to integrate it with the mainland China. One of the initial steps taken by the Chinese government to integrate the region with mainland China was a carefully planned demographic change. According to Mahesh Rajan Debata (2007)^[4], han migration in the region to balance or change the demography of the region is seen as a bold step by the Chinese government. The change in the demography on the Chinese part was to facilitate government action for development of the region but this was seen by the ethnic minorities, particularly the Uyghurs, as an aggressive move enforced on the region. The Uyghurs criticized this move and called it as a process of sinicization to subdue minorities. Later, the Cultural Revolution, which began in later half of 1966 proved to be an attack of the culture and traditions of the minority population of Xinjiang. Radical policies were implemented during the Cultural Revolution. The Chinese Communist Party for the purpose of assimilation took radical stance on minority groups. The national political goals were prioritized over the minority policy. This led to a kind of consciousness among the minorities as well as built a fear among them about their identity and faith. This fear of identity dissolution and the racial discrimination faced by the Muslim minority grew and resulted in various peaceful protests. However, eventually, the Deng Xiaoping's economic reform policies that were more relaxed in terms of religion increased the interaction between the Muslims of Xinjiang and the outside world that changed the religious picture in Xinjiang by strengthening Muslim religious identity. Deng promoted common identity and emphasized on socio economic development in the region (Debata 2007)^[4]. According to Debashish Chaudhuri (2013)^[1], the "persistent propagandist sloganeering and orchestration from the centre" is on the major cause in creating aversion in the minds of minorities in Xinjiang. These policies and programmes initiated by the Chinese government for about four decades creates a drift between the Han and Uyghurs. There was evident dissatisfaction and dissent amongst the Muslim population, Uyghurs in particular against the government.

Post-cold war dynamics

Post-cold war, the change in the international dynamics had a major impact on Xinjiang and the situation in Xinjiang worsened. Three major events that fueled the rise of religious tensions in Xinjiang are: firstly, tense situation in Afghanistan, secondly, sudden rise of political Islam in and around Central Asia and thirdly, civil war in Tajikistan (Debata 2017) ^[5] Later, several violent incidents took place in Xinjiang post-cold war, which led to the rise of religious extremism in the worst form.

The rise in ethnic conflicts and violence compelled the Chinese authorities, officials and party functionaries to control educational and media establishment in Xinjiang and have denounced the “infiltration, subversion and sabotage by hostile foreign Islamic elements” for fueling the separatist movement in Xinjiang. In 1990, a local newspaper, Xinjiang Ribao called to end religious interference regarding the issues related to education, administration and judiciary. The newspaper stressed on the need to prevent “unfriendly foreign organizations and individuals and their local supporters from using religion for their dangerous designs” (Warikoo 2000) ^[8]. Hence, the feeling of persistent subjugation sparked the emotion for separatism and the constant influence from the outside world, post-cold war, led to the rise of religious extremism in Xinjiang and inevitable unrest throughout the decade.

The Chinese authority then came up with the basic ideology of the ‘three evil’ forces that are responsible for creating unrest in Xinjiang. The ‘three evil’ forces considered by China as religious extremism, separatism and terrorism are the root cause of instability in Xinjiang and the Chinese authorities have taken several elaborate, concrete and practical steps to counter these evils (Warikoo 2010) ^[9]. On Chinese discourse of the rising radical ideologies, religious extremism, ethnic separatism and terrorism, officially called as “three evil forces” is seen as the root of contention in Xinjiang.

Post 2000 dynamics

Chinese Premier Jiang Zemin announced the Great Western Development Programme during the Ninth NPC in 1999. Wang Lequan, the party secretary in Xinjiang from 1994-2010, was the most trusted CCP lieutenant. He took instructions from Jiang Zemin and later, Hu Jintao to manage affairs in Xinjiang. His hidden agenda was “to solidify the Chinese nation” by the ways of “integrating and assimilating the Uyghurs into national mainstream and to consolidate inland political control (Debata 2022) ^[7]. This was considered as “a major state project of nation-building directed at the interior provincial-level jurisdictions in order to encourage endogenous economic growth, to reduce socio-economic inequalities and to ensure social and political stability in non-

Han areas of the PRC”. The Great Western Development programme included “programmes and projects implemented on all levels (from the supra-regional to the household levels), and concerning all different spheres such as economics, infrastructure, environment, social structures, education, inland political control, etc” with the aim “Leap Frog Development” particularly in the Xinjiang region. (Debata 2020) ^[6]. China aimed at developing the economy in Xinjiang for the purpose of uplifting the people in the border areas and improve their living standards. It has been believed by the Chinese that the idea of “three forces” may

have deep historical reasons, but one of the main causes of it is low living standards of Uyghurs and their belief that “everything can be changed as long as independence is achieved”. Therefore, military attacks are seen no solution to achieve the goals of harmonious living. Chinese authority emphasize on the built up of economic base and the improvement in cultural quality of life through scientific development as the solution to create a good social environment in China. China has initiated several projects and development programmes in Xinjiang that include roads, railways, buildings, telecommunications, high rise residential apartments, oil refineries, industries and so on. The capital of Xinjiang, Urumqi is growing towards higher development due to massive industrialization and so are Uyghur dominated regions that include Khotan, Kashgar etc. China has initiated a policy to involve various Provinces/ Counties outside of Xinjiang for the socio-economic development of areas in Xinjiang. Several cultural policies have been implemented by China to win the support of minorities by promoting their culture and traditions through several ways: a) To promote and preserve all objects, cultural sites, historical evidences and episodes of Xinjiang, which will demonstrate

China’s political and administrative jurisdiction. b) Numerous sites that have been ascribed national and cultural importance are presented and appropriated as treasured ancient Chinese civilization. c) To promote cultural tourism through Uyghur shrines d) Promotion of Uyghur handicraft that include musical instruments, wooden articles, brassware, knife etc. In Kashgar, the Central Asian bazaars function to cater the need of the local people in Xinjiang cities and towns. These bazaars have developed as international trading centres with adjoining nations of Central and South Asia. e) Promotion of Uyghur music and dance at national level for the creation of better cultural and social understanding between Han and Uyghur communities. Uyghur boys and girls perform dance at National Stadium at several occasions. Even in Beijing Olympic in 2008 several dance performances were presented by Uyghur artists. f) All China Entrance Examination is a platform through which Uyghurs are drawn into national mainstream through weightage points and uniform system of entrance examination (Warikoo 2010) ^[9].

Even though Chinese government claimed to have progressed in the matters of economic and social development in Xinjiang, Debashish Chaudhuri (2013) ^[11] is of the opinion that there has been hardly any difference in the governance at the local level in Xinjiang. Due to economic deprivation and persistent suppression of Uyghurs, inter-ethnic relations also. The dissatisfaction was visible in the form of 2009 July riots in Urumqi. These riots revealed the clear inter-ethnic cleavage between the Uyghur and Han, and also exposed the “weak social foundation, poor social management and inefficiency of the regional authority.

According to Mahesh Ranjan Debata (2020) ^[6], Chinese Uyghur policies have become more “astute, aggressive and assertive” past 2 decades in comparison to the policies adopted in 1949, which were “well crated, calculated and assimilationist in nature”. Post 2008, several violent incidents took place that resulted instability and unrest in the Xinjiang region. In August 2008, four days before the 2008 Beijing Olympics, a terror strike took place in Kashgar,

Xinjiang. In July 2009, in an ethnic riot 197 people died and about 1,600 were injured in the capital of Xinjiang, Urumqi. Later in July 2011, three violent incidents took place in Khotan and Kashgar, the southern cities in Xinjiang, that lead to the death of about 40 people. In 2013, Aril and June, attacks in Kashgar and Turpan took place (Debata 2017) ^[5] Later, in October, a car crashed in the Tiannanmen Square, Beijing. In March 2014, explosions and in late April, knife attacks on Urumqi Railway station took place. In May 2014, in a busy market, the terrorist act of explosions took place (Chaudhuri 2014) ^[2].

There were several measures taken up by the Chinese government to stabilize situations growing violent in Xinjiang post these violent incidents. For instance, the Second Xinjiang Work Forum, which was held from 28-29 May, 2014 Beijing, marked the beginning of fast-track development objectives and decided to emphasize on the social wellbeing and long-term political stability, most importantly, people-oriented development. The Second Xinjiang Work Forum made “moderate plan” prioritizing greater investment in education and employment generation. These were considered as a means of resolve general livelihood problems, and to build ‘mutually embedded multi-ethnic social structure’ with the prime objective of coexistence of ethnic groups (Chaudhuri 2014) ^[2]. On the other hand, when Chen Quanguo became the CCP Secretary in XUAR in 2016, he implemented the “great wall of iron” as a security barrier to safeguard national unity, social stability and ethnic solidarity in the Xinjiang region. His leadership also included “grid-style social management, a technology-intensive approach to urban governance and intelligence-led policing”.

This process included surveillance network using facial recognition, collecting citizen’s biometric data, spyware in phones of the Uyghurs and GPS tracking of their private vehicles. The other strategy was “four in one defence”, this was formulated against any anti-Chinese operation in Xinjiang, where in, about 50,000 to 1,00,000 PLA and People’s Armed Police personnel, approximately 9-10 million Han immigrants and residents and over 2.68 million cadres to be deployed for manage the affairs. (Debata 2020) ^[6]. On 1st April 2017, the “Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Regulations on De-extremification” came into being and later, I August 2017, White Paper released by the Information State Council of China established “vocational education and training centres in accordance with the law to prevent the breeding and spread of terrorism and religious extremism, effectively curbing the frequent terrorist incidents and protecting the rights to life, health, and development of the people of all ethnic groups.” (Debata 2020) ^[6]

Chaudhuri (2021) ^[3], noted that since 1996, China characterized Uyghur political activities, be it religious, social or cultural, from the “single prism of their ethno-religious identity” as a “biological threat” “akin to a virus” to Chinese society that had to be eliminated. Chaudhuri also pointed out that the current developments in China in terms of national security has been established on the basis of a very “solid foundation of an authoritarian state structure”. He also emphasizes on how “only a minuscule fraction of society questions the political leadership, with the majority of the population silently accepting the infringement of their individual rights and private space”. Western Media like the New York Times and Human Rights Organisation like the

Human Rights Watch have accused Chinese government of “mass arbitrary detention, torture, and mistreatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang and systematic and increasingly pervasive controls on daily life there, violating fundamental rights to freedom of expression, religion, and privacy, and protections from torture and unfair trials” (Debata 2020) ^[6] According to Chaudhuri (2021) ^[3], “the continued adoption of strong measures of state violence and coercion by the authorities, proved counter-productive.” He strongly believes that these crushing blows had alienated large sections of Uyghur population and also has been responsible to pushed several young people of the Uyghur community to choose the path of terrorism. The “fierce propaganda” was a “gross failure of the party-state to distinguish between anti-state separatist/terrorist activities and the legitimate civil rights demands of the local minorities for the redressal of their genuine grievances.” According to Chaudhuri, since the global war against terrorism started, “China has been trying to reconstruct terrorist threats in the region by continuously emphasizing the impact of pan-Islamist philosophy, Islamist jihad, transnational terrorism, and religious sects like Ikhwan, Wahhabism and Salafism in nurturing extremism among Uyghur population in Xinjiang”. Chaudhuri (2021) ^[3] states that “the Uyghurs were only using Islam to resist cultural assimilation by the Han dominated Chinese state.” Overview of Indian perspective

According to Debata (2020) ^[6], Xinjiang’s geo strategic importance lets China to believe that its policies in Xinjiang are “apt, timely and suited” most to its national interest, Also, China considers this matter “out and out internal”, hence sending a message to the world that “no outside or external intervention or influence in Xinjiang can be brooked”. Debata agrees to the fact that as a nationstate, it is the “primary duty and utmost responsibility is to ensure its national unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity”. In his opinion, the logic behind Chinese policies in Xinjiang seem “ineluctable”. Considering that fact that the “security situation across the globe post-Soviet period has been jeopardized because of the rise and growth of non-traditional security threats such as terrorism, religious extremism, transnational drug trafficking, smuggling of arms and military technologies, epidemics such as HIV/AIDS and ecological disaster”. From the point of view of

Warikoo (2020) ^[10], China is “conscious of this threat to its territorial integrity”. China consolidated its military presence and Han settlement in the region to secure its frontier. According to Warikoo, China will firmly maintain its territorial integrity through all means-social, economic and political. According to Chaudhuri (2021) ^[3] on the other hand, it has become imperative for the Chinese government to maintain stability and ensure security in Xinjiang region in public eye since the announcement of the global connectivity program, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The importance of Xinjiang as a region furthered in terms of geo-strategy and geo-economic. Hence, to ensure and maintain peace in the Xinjiang region has now become a matter of China’s territorial sovereignty and national prestige.

Conclusion

To conclude, the Indian perspective is diverse in relation to religious extremism in Xinjiang. But the common ground is

the desperate need to maintain peace in the region since the Belt and Road

Initiative holds prime importance to China. Xinjiang's geo-strategic and geo-political positioning has made this region to become a medium for China to acquire socially, politically and economically most influential. But China fails to realize that suppressing human population of that very place, from which China aims to benefit its position, will not lead to perpetual peace. Hence, more constructive actions and strategies must be adopted by the Chinese authorities to safeguard different ethnicities that inhabits the region alongside taking care of the national security.

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