



Original Article

'Religious identity and coal development in Pakistan': Ecology, land rights and the politics of exclusion



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of religious identity in the context of a coal development project in District Tharparkar, Pakistan. Research was conducted in six rural communities located in the vicinity of the coal project. The results obtained are important for two reasons. First, they provide insights into the heterogeneous composition of communities based on religious identity, which explains contrasting perceptions toward project development. Second, they entail a practical dimension that suggests that in the process of assessment, development and management of coal resources, differences related to religious and community identity must be recognized and taken into account to minimize community conflict.

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1. Introduction

The complex relationship between people and environment, and how people define and value the environment in a multidimensional context, has often been categorized by phrases such as 'sense of place', 'place attachment' and 'place identity' (Cantrill, 1998; Cheng et al., 2003). This relationship is not just limited to the physical attributes of the environment but also includes psychological and emotional values assigned to the place. According to Ryden:

Through extensive interaction with a place, people may begin to define themselves in terms of [...] that place, to the extent that they cannot really express who they are without inevitably taking into account the setting that surrounds them as well. [Ryden, 1993, p. 76, as cited in Stedman, 2002]

We explore this premise using a case study of Hindu and Muslim communities of the Thar Desert in Pakistan which have coexisted peacefully for centuries. Pakistan's District Tharparkar (Thar Desert) lies close to the Indian border (Fig. 1), where coal development is escalating in the midst of unusual demographics.

Pakistan is facing a power short-fall of around 6000 MW, primarily due to an explosive population growth rate and rising industrial demand (IPRI, 2013; PPB, 2008; Rahman, 2011). Currently, the role of coal is almost negligible, despite 175 billion tons of indigenous coal reserves lying beneath the Thar Desert (Geological Survey of Pakistan, 1992, as cited in Sindh Development Review, 2009). Experts believe that development of the Thar coal deposits will reduce the country's dependence on expensive imported oil and will significantly reduce the stretching gap between demand and supply (Rahman, 2011), and thus help to extricate the country from an acute energy crisis. Development of the Thar Desert's coal reserves, however, can potentially disrupt the peaceful coexistence between the region's Muslim and Hindu communities, with the former making up more than 40 per cent of the District's population (Suthar, 2012). Resource development can accentuate dormant fractures in communities. A planning process that ignores multifaceted community dynamics and the role of religion that underpins differences in perceptions of the development can potentially expose the region to inter-community conflict.

This study was undertaken against the context of escalating ethno-religious tensions at the national level, with the aim of

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Fig. 1. Map of Pakistan identifying District Tharparkar (Thar Desert).

Source: *Environmental and Social Impact Assessment* (2013), Sindh Carbon Energy Limited.

broadening understanding of how in such fractured conditions, resource development can accentuate differences in perception of place-linked religious identity.

2. Resource development and ethno-religious conflict

Existing literature in the social sciences is replete with studies which seek to understand the complex factors responsible for shaping community conflict, particularly in developing countries, and more specifically in developing countries with significant extractive industries (Humphreys, 2005; Nnoli, 1998). Scholars caution that communities with embedded horizontal inequalities are extremely prone to conflict, especially when they are based on ethnicity and religion (Christian et al., 1976; Gurr et al., 1993; Nafziger and Auvinen, 2002). Many countries have experienced catastrophic social and economic impacts, and indigenous natural resource wealth has become synonymous with conflict due to a combination of local inequalities and lack of governance (e.g., ACCORD, 2009; Keen, 1998; Peet and Watts, 2002; Ross, 2004; UN, 2001).

Several scholars believe conflict is a pervasive and inevitable phenomenon (Burton, 1987; Okoh, 2007), and is a symptom that may help in diagnosing root problems predicated on “social values of welfare, security [and] justice” (Burton, 1987, p. 138). While appreciating this important role of conflict, our research seeks to identify ways to minimize escalation of conflict and to develop constructive pathways that bring sustainable socio-economic growth to impoverished areas, especially those fractured by religion or ethnicity. In this paper, we consider extractive resource development in a polarized ethno-religious context and how community perceptions about resource development are shaped by such differences. In particular, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and its impact on resource nationalism deserves attention and we sought a case site where such an analysis could be undertaken by comparing opinions from Muslim and non-Muslim residents.

Many studies argue that multi-ethnic societies are more prone to resource-conflicts (e.g. Gurr et al., 1993; Huntington, 1993; Tadjoeeddin, 2007; Wimmer et al., 2009), since discrimination of one group could fuel differences among group identities. For

example, the recent demolition of the centuries-old ‘Shri Rama Pir’ Hindu temple in Karachi, Pakistan, and the ‘Durga Mata’ Temple in Choryo, Tharparkar, carried out in the name of development, has accentuated the perception of resource-based conflicts in the region.

There is no doubt religion can play an important role in amplifying conflicts in various countries, however, causality in this regard is complex. For instance, Fearon and Laitin (1996) in their study of interethnic cooperation claim that most multi-ethnic societies are peaceful. Why then does religious conflict erupt in some multi-ethnic societies, but not in others? Our focus on District Tharparkar helps to answer this question. It is the only region in Pakistan where Hindus and Muslims still live in a relatively harmonious relationship despite the rampant rise of religious conflict across the rest of the country. How then might this harmony be maintained in the presence of resource development?

Various scholars suggest social, political and economic inequalities between different groups can account for stoking up conflict. This implies that religion, discrimination and social exclusion alone are insufficient to account for conflict, but when combined with economic inequalities which can be ‘instrumentalized’ by some, local-level conflict between the resource industry and the community, and between communities is more likely (Brown and Langer, 2010; Stewart, 2008; Stewart and Brown, 2007; Østby, 2007; Mancini, 2005), leading to a higher probability of conflict. Thus, cultural and religious differences can be accentuated by economic, social and political inequalities. Stewart (2009) further argue that natural resource development pronounces regional inequalities especially when resource development occurs in “ethnically or religiously distinct regions of a country”, with those at the bottom of the socio-economic scale more likely to perceive that they will not be the primary beneficiary of a project development (p. 17).

In our case study, an additional cleavage must also be added: the sub-caste system within the Hindu faith, which leads to greater persistence of social and economic inequalities. The pervasiveness of caste stratification is an important feature of Pakistani Hindus. For instance, the Tharparkar castes of Bheel, Menghwar and Kholhi

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