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The Siraiki Province Movement in Punjab, Pakistan: Prospects and Challenges

Abstract

The Pakistani Federation has granted more autonomy to the provinces through the 18th constitutional amendment. This autonomy has proved impetus for the ongoing demands of sub-national groups and provincial minorities for creation of new provinces in Pakistan. The Siraikis of South Punjab have been advocating for a separate province since 1970s. The analysis suggests that the movement appears quite successful in achieving some of its core objectives. However, the movement is still far away from attaining its ultimate political destination i.e. the establishment of a separate Siraiki Province. In this context, this paper attempts to investigate the prospects and challenges to the movement of Siraiki Province. The paper argues that without fundamental changes in its objectives and strategy, the movement would not be able to achieve its goal in near future. Though, a more accommodative and flexible approach would enhance the probability of its success.

Key Words: Siraiki Identity, Province, Punjab, Prospects, Challenges

Introduction

The Politics of ethnicity and nationalism in Pakistan has attracted a significant academic attention in the recent years. Several studies are available that present the analysis of Baloch, Sindhi, Pashtun, and Mohajir Nationalist Movements (Amin, 1988, Ahmed, 1998, Laif & Hamza, 2000, Siddiqi, 2012, Ahmer, 2013, Khan, 2014). However, only a few studies have been devoted to the politics of Siraiki identity (Khan, 2004, Langah, 2012, Roofi & Alqama, 2013, Hashmi & Majeed, 2014, Hashmi & Majeed, 2014, Farooq, Hussain, & Saeed, 2014), and still fewer to the Siraiki Province Movement (Langah, 2011, Pildat, 2011, Sandhu, 2015, Shaheen, 2015, Butt & Ahmed, 2016), Hence, this study attempts to add an original contribution (based on recent literature and primary data) to the existing scholarship on the Siraiki Province Movement.

Punjab, the most populous and prosperous province of Pakistan¹, has three well-known regions i.e. the Punjabi speaking, Central Punjab; the Pothohari speaking,

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Northern Punjab; and the Siraiki speaking, South Punjab (Mushtaq, 2016). The Siraiki community constitutes majority in three divisions of South Punjab, namely Multan, Bahawalpur and Dera Ghazi Khan. Since the past few years, the Siraikis are demanding the creation of a separate province by proposing the division of Punjab on the ethnic lines. Historically, Punjab has not witnessed any substantial protest on ethnic grounds since the creation of Pakistan. It is only in the recent years that “the Siraiki-speaking areas have made a conscious and explicit attempt to distance themselves from the dominant groups in Punjab” (Samad, 2007, p.116) The Siraiki-speaking region is relatively underdeveloped and impoverished area of Punjab Province. Equally, the Siraikis believe that they have distinctive identity based on Siraiki language and culture. They envisage that the creation of separate Siraiki Province would not only address the issues related to their relative deprivation but would also contribute to the development of Siraiki language and identity. Although it has become a popular demand of the region but the movement is confronting several challenges. In this backdrop, this paper attempts to investigate the challenges and prospects for the separate Siraiki Province Movement.

The Siraiki Province Movement

The Siraiki nationalists trace origin of Siraiki identity back to the annexation of Multan province with the Lahore province in 1818 by Ranjeet Singh (Langah, 2005). This annexation generated a sense of relative deprivation and marginalization among the people of this region. The local folklores of that period demonstrated the feelings and concerns of the people of this region (M. K. Siyal, Personal Communication, May 14, 2015)². The Siraikis argue that the region remained neglected and downgraded even during the British period (1857-1947). The projects launched by the British government such as the canal colonies and establishment of cantonments brought development and prosperity in Northern and Central Punjab. But, these projects proved fruitless and unproductive for South Punjab (Tabish, 2014). It is reported that only one out of nine canal colonies of Punjab were established in this region. Similarly, the cantonments were established mostly in the Central Punjab³ (I. Beg, Personal Communication, April 19, 2015)⁴. It is also noteworthy that Punjab remained the major recruitment center for Indian Army during British period. It is reported that nearly 200,000 soldiers were recruited in the Indian Army from Punjab until 1919. But, majority of the recruits came from the Central Punjab. It is estimated that less than ten percent soldiers were recruited from the Siraiki speaking region of Punjab (Engerman & Sokoloff, 2005). The ongoing pattern of recruitment in military continued even after 1947. Equally, the Siraikis remained under-represented in civil bureaucracy over the years. After the creation of Pakistan, Multan and its adjacent region continued as a part of Punjab Province. Additionally, another Siraiki speaking region, the princely state of Bahawalpur acceded Pakistan on October 5, 1947 (Khanam, 2016).

It has been argued that Bahawalpur was one of the affluent Princely States of India. However, after its accession with Pakistan and subsequently merger with the province of West-Pakistan, the situation changed. After the termination of one-unit scheme, it was merged into Punjab Province by being granted a status of Division. The people of Bahawalpur did not accept this merger and started a movement for

restoration of its provincial status⁵ (Kakar, 2012). The activists were arrested and were kept behind the bars. It is reported that in an encounter with the police, two protesters were killed and several were injured in 1970. Among the most strong organizations were *Bahawalpur Suba Mahaz Movement* (Bahawalpur province Movement) and *Bahawalpur Muthida Mohaz* (Bahawalpur United Front) (Rehman, 2006; Ahmed, 2012; Konjo, 2007). The movement got momentum and attracted the masses at large scale. It has been asserted that the candidates who contested the elections of 1970 from the platform of Siraiki parties received significant electoral support (M. H. Bukhari, Personal Communication, May 16, 2015)⁶. Meanwhile, the breakup of Pakistan in 1971 proved a counterproductive for the movement (Javaid, 2009). In the changing situation, the Prince of Bahawalpur stated that “the demand of separate province was not a priority” (Qayyum, 2013).

The movement for Bahawalpur province subsumed gradually. Many activists of this movement joined the cultural and literary movement that was operating in Multan and surroundings to assimilate the sub-cultural groups of the region into greater Siraiki identity. Gradually, this cultural and lingual movement was transformed into a political organization, namely the Pakistan Siraiki Party. Some activists of Bahawalpur movement joined hands with their counterparts in Multan region (N. T. Langah, Personal Communication, April 03, 2015)⁷. The word “Siraikistan” was coined by Siraiki Nationalists of Bahawalpur and Multan for separate province of the Siraikis⁸ (Langah, 2011). However, some advocators of Bahawalpur movement renounced the unification of both regions in a single administrative unit. They argued that the Siraiki province movement was sponsored by Bhutto regime to counter the Bahawalpur Province Movement (Manan, 2012).

The first All Pakistan Siraiki Literary Conference held between 14-16 March 1975 marked a significant turning point for Siraiki identity politics (Khan, 2004; Mirza, 2009; Rasoolpuri, 2006). The conference suggested certain measures for the promotion of Siraiki language and culture⁹. Among notable participants of the conference were Haji Saifullah, the then opposition leader of Punjab Assembly (Dawn, 2009) and Christopher Schakle, the renowned linguistic from University of London. The speakers at conference condemned the allotment of lands in Cholistan to non-Siraikis and asserted for adaptation of quota system for jobs (Baloch, 2014). The conference triggered identity based political activity in the region. The Siraiki lawyers of Lahore High Court sought to establish a forum under the leadership of Taj Langah¹⁰ for promotion of Siraiki cause. (Siddiq, 2012; Khan, 1993). Besides, the number of cultural and political organizations proliferated in the region. Siraiki Qaomi Mahaz (Siraiki National Movement), the Siraiki Conference, Siraiki Look Sanjh (*Siraiki* People's Co-operative Society) Siraiki Suba Mahaz (Siraiki Province Front), are some of the organizations devoted to the Siraiki cause. Though these organizations reinforced distinctive Siraiki identity among the people, yet they could not mobilize the masses successfully. The Siraiki parties were disowned by the electorate in several elections¹¹. However, the demand for separate province not only sustained over the years but surfaced more vigorously in the aftermath of the enactment of 18th constitutional amendment in April 2010. The 18th constitutional amendment had

granted considerable autonomy to the provinces. It has been argued that the decentralization through amendment has proved impetus for the ongoing demand for separate Siraiki Province (Ahmer, 2013; Hanif & Khan, 2011). The matter was much politicized owing to the point scoring by political parties on this issue. Pakistan Peoples Party's (PPP) backed resolution for creation of new province (s) in Punjab was passed in the National Assembly on May 3, 2012. Subsequently, a commission comprising of the parliamentarians was designated to submit feasibility report and possible options for creation of new province (s) in Punjab (Babar et al, 2013). With regards to PPP initiatives, Pakistan Muslim League (N), the ruling party in Punjab, moved two resolutions in the Punjab Assembly. One resolution pertaining to the creation of Siraiki province and second for the restoration of Bahawalpur province. Both resolutions were passed by the Assembly (Manan, 2012). However, the resolutions proved futile as the case seems shelved since the elections of 2013. The following section of this study investigates the prospects and challenges to the movement to assess the probability of success for this demand.

Prospects and Challenges

This section evaluates the prospects and challenges confronting the Siraiki Province Movement. The analysis reveals some sharp contrasts as on the one hand, the movement appears quite successful in getting some of its core objectives while on the other hand, it seems more vulnerable on other fronts. The major achievements of the movement and the potential challenges confronting its goal to get a separate province on ethnic lines are discussed in the following sections.

Prospects of Siraiki Province Movement

This section illustrates the major achievements of the Siraiki Province Movement. The section argues that the movement has emerged as a popular demand in the South Punjab.

- i. The most significant success of this movement vests in the development of a collective and distinct Siraiki identity among the Siraiki masses in South Punjab. Previously, the three regions of South Punjab had distinctive linguistic groups. Multani was the language of Multan and its surroundings areas. Riyasati was the language of formerly Princely State of Bahawalpur. The people of Dera Ghazi Khan and the surroundings spoke a language called 'Derewal'. But, the Siraiki identity movement has successfully amalgamated the subgroups or local linguistic identities into a broader category of Siraiki identity named "Siraiki".
- ii. The movement that barely predates the 1960s has not only invented the identity but also has made the masses conscious of their separate and distinctive identity. A recent survey conducted in the region indicates that more than three-fourth of the interviewees agreed that the movement for separate province has contributed significantly to the promotion of Siraiki identity (Shaheen, 2015). It is pertinent to mention that the Siraiki-speaking interviewees were fifty-seven percent of the selected sampled population.

- iii. Recognition of Siraiki as a separate language by the state officials is another success of the movement. For a longer period, Siraiki has been regarded as the dialect of either Punjabi or Sindhi. However, the Siraiki identity movement led to the recognition of Siraiki as a separate language. The Pakistani government officially adopted it as a distinct language in the 1981 census (M. Gadhi, Personal Communication, April 25, 2015)¹². It has been reported that it is spoken by nearly twenty million people of Pakistan that constitutes almost 10.42% of total population (N. T. Langah, Personal Communication, April 03, 2015). Perhaps, it is the major landmark of the movement till now.
- iv. The recognition of Siraiki identity by other ethnic groups is another accomplishment of the movement. The Siraiki nationalists actively participated in the so-called, “Pakistan Oppressed Nations Movement” (PONM). Though, the PONM’s role remained quite limited and trivial, yet it provided Siraiki nationalists an opportunity to get sympathy and support for Siraiki cause from other ethno- linguistic groups. Consequently, the Siraikis are now regarded as one among the five indigenous nationalities of Pakistan (Asif, 2010).
- v. It is also noteworthy to mention that the already ongoing demand for separate province has attracted considerable attention in the recent past. The National Assembly had adopted a resolution in favor of the creation of Southern Punjab/Siraiki province. The Siraiki activists welcomed the resolution for division of Punjab and creation of a Southern Province (Mahmood, 2012). Subsequently, Punjab Assembly passed a resolution for the creation of South Punjab/Siraiki Province (Manan, 2012).
- vi. It is also pertinent to mention that a survey of public opinion revealed that the movement which was primarily based on linguistic and cultural notion is gradually becoming more regional in its character. The result of survey illustrates that more than seventy-eight percent of respondents have approved the creation of a separate province. This support was not confined to the Siraiki speaking population, but almost all groups based in the South Punjab agreed with this demand (Shaheen, 2015, P.100). However, it is noteworthy to mention that majority of respondents proposed the creation of province on administrative basis: overall 58.3% of the respondents from this region agreed that Siraiki province should be constituted on administrative basis (Shaheen, 2015, p.82). Nevertheless, it is a significant achievement as the demand is becoming equally vocal among Siraiki and non-Siraiki population of the region.

Challenges for Siraiki Province Movement

Although the demand for separate province has gained momentum recently, here are certain potential challenges that impede the journey of the movement to its ultimate destination i.e. the creation of a separate province on ethnic lines.

- i. The first challenge for movement is the heterogeneous nature of the region. Although Siraikis constitute a clear majority in most parts of the region, Punjabis outnumber them in the districts of Vehari, Khanewal,

and Bahawalnagar. In addition, the districts of Lodhran, Bahawalpur, Layyah, Rahim Yar Khan, and Multan host almost one-third non-Siraiki residents¹³. Only in the districts of Dera Ghazi Khan, Rajanpur, and Muzaffargarh, more than three-fourth of the population is Siraiki speaking. This heterogeneity of the region is an obstacle for creation of province on linguistic basis. Hence, it has been argued that the demand for Siraiki province can only be satisfied if all ethnic groups of the region agree. (Shafique, 2014). It has been emphasized that without active participation of the Punjabi settlers, the demand of Siraiki province movement will become more unlikely to be materialized (H. Chaudhry, Personal Communication, May 18, 2015)¹⁴.

- ii. Revival of Bahawalpur Province Movement is another challenge for the movement. As it has been discussed earlier that after the termination of one-unit scheme, the Bahawalpur province movement surfaced vigorously. However, it declined after the separation of East Pakistan in 1971. But, recently the movement for separate provinces in Siraiki and Hazara region has triggered the Bahawalpur province movement once again after the 18th constitutional amendment (Zulfiqar, 2012). The Punjab Assembly has passed resolution for reinstatement of the Bahawalpur Province. The resolution stated that “the people of Bahawalpur Province have been struggling for the restoration of the status of Bahawalpur Province for decades. The house admits their struggle in this regard. Based on these facts, the house demands the immediate restoration of Bahawalpur province under Article 239 of the Constitution” (The Express Tribune, May 09, 2012). Apparently, it does not seem possible to constitute two provinces in Southern Punjab. Therefore, it is argued by Siraiki activists that the revival of Bahawalpur Province Movement is a political stunt to weaken the Siraiki Province Movement.
- iii. Absence of sufficient electoral support for Siraiki parties is another factor that deteriorates the legitimacy of demand. Although the Siraiki political organizations have successfully constructed the Siraiki identity, they could not appeal the Siraiki electorate. The parties were discredited by the statewide parties in several elections (R. B. Rais, Personal Communication, April 12, 2015)¹⁵. The stable electoral support for PML-N¹⁶ in the region supplements the argument that Siraiki nationalists failed to attract masses’ support for Siraiki Province Movement (T. Rehman, Personal Communication, April 10, 2015)¹⁷. Equally, the parties lack street power as the rallies and demonstrations organized by the Siraiki nationalist parties have failed to attract masses. It has been reported that the Siraiki separate province movement has no support among the public as there is no evidence available of public processions or protests demanding separate province (M. Leghari, Personal Communication, May 22, 2015)¹⁸.
- iv. Factionalism and internal divisions among the nationalists hinder the movement from becoming a viable and cohesive political campaign. Almost, eleven factions are operating in different parts of the region. This

internal division of Siraiki nationalist leadership poses grave challenge to the success of the movement. Even, there is disagreement over the name of province for which they are struggling. Some are stuck with “Siraikistan” while others agree to name it as “South Punjab”.

- v. Politicization of the issue is another challenge for the movement. Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM) supports the movement in a hope that the establishment of Siraiki province will pave its way to demand of Mohajir province. It submitted a resolution to simplify the constitutional process for the creation of new provinces¹⁹ (Tunio, 2012). Pakistan Tehrik Insaf (PTI) is also in favor of new provinces including Siraiki and Hazara provinces. In 2014, the party moved a resolution for the creation of Hazara province in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly but this resolution was opposed by PPP, Quami Watan party (QWP) and Awami National Party (ANP) (Hameed, 2014). PPP and PML-N has also submitted resolutions for creation of new provinces in National Assembly and Punjab Assembly respectively (Manan, 2011). But, it is an open secret that the resolutions were merely for point scoring both inside and outside the parliament.
- vi. The demand for creation of separate province on ethnic grounds is the major hurdle in its way of success. The Siraiki nationalists are not ready to accept the creation of Siraiki Province on administrative lines as it was argued by President of PSP, Taj Langah “we want a new province comprising of 21 districts based on shared language, culture and history. The proposed name of Janoobi Punjab is out of question. We will not accept any name other than Siraiki province.” (Ahmer, 2013). However, the Federation seems reluctant to endorse the demand for separate province on ethnic grounds. Even, the Sindh and Baloch nationalists oppose such demand as it will legitimize the demands for division of Sindh and Balochistan provinces as well. (Kahut, 2009).
- vii. The demand for Siraikistan seems hard to be materialized as it includes the regions beyond the Punjab Province as the proposed map of the province includes Tank and Dera Ismail Khan, the districts of KPK Province (Langah, 2005). Additionally, the proposal includes many districts having majority of Punjabi speaking population.
- viii. The constitutional procedure for creation of new provinces is an additional impediment for the Siraiki Province Movement. According to the Article 239 of the Constitution, “A Bill to amend the constitution which would have the effect of altering the limits of a province shall not be presented to the President for assent unless it has been passed by the Provincial Assembly of that Province by the votes of not less than two-thirds of its total membership”. Keeping in view this constitutional procedure, it is most unlikely that Punjab Assembly will pass the resolution for creation of separate Siraiki Province.

Conclusion

The Siraiki speaking South Punjab is the impoverished region of the most prosperous and populous province of Pakistan. Equally, the region is underrepresented in the vital institutions of the state. This relative deprivation has underpinned the nationalist sentiments in the Siraiki Region. Consequently, a collective and distinct Siraiki identity has emerged in South Punjab. Subsequently, this regional identity has demanded a separate province by dividing the Punjab. The Siraiki Province Movement has achieved a reasonable success. Siraiki has been documented as a separate and independent language and the Siraikis have been recognized as a distinctive ethno-linguistic group by the other ethnicities. However, the movement is still far away from its ultimate political destination i.e. the establishment of a separate Siraiki Province. The movement still requires more sound narrative and a broader spectrum. Without fundamental changes in the objectives and strategy, the movement would not be able to get its ultimate goal in the near future. Though, a more accommodative and flexible approach would enhance the probability of its success.

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References

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- 1 Pakistan is a multiethnic state. Each of its province is allied with a certain ethno-linguistic group – Punjab with Punjabis, Sindh with Sindhis, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa with Pashtuns, and Balochistan with Balochs. Additionally, each province has a significant minority group: Siraikis in south Punjab, Mohajirs in urban Sindh, Hazarewals in the Hazara region of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Pashtuns in north Balochistan.
 - 2 Mansoor Kareem Siyal is Multan based Siraiki nationalist and the founder of Siraiki National Congress.
 - 3 For details, see Javaid, 2009 ; Stone, 2002 ; Khawaja, 2012 ; Mazumder, 2011 ; and Javaid, 2004.
 - 4 Advocate Ibrahim Beg is an Islamabad based Siraiki Activist
 - 5 In 1955, the provinces and states of west-Pakistan were amalgamated in a single administrative unit, the province of west Pakistan. After the breakup of this province in 1969, the provincial status of Punjab, the then NWFP, and Sindh was restored. Additionally, Balochistan was granted the provincial status. However, the provincial status of Bahawalpur was not reinstated. It was merged into the province of Punjab.
 - 6 Dr Musavir Hussain Bukhari is an Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science in Islamia University, Bahawalpur.
 - 7 Nukhbah Taj Langah is the Chairperson of Pakistan Siraiki Party. She is currently working as Assistant Professor at the Department of English, F.C. College University, Lahore.
 - 8 The nationalists demanded the separate province of “Siraikistan” comprising of several districts of Punjab such as Mianwali, Khushab, Bhakkar, Sargodha, Chiniot, Jhang, TobaTek Singh, Khanewal, Sahiwal, Vehari, Pakpattan, ,Rahim Yar Khan ,Bahawalpur,

Rajan Pur, Dera Ghazi Khan, Lodhran, Multan, Muzaffargarh, and Layyah and two districts of the then NWFP, Dera Ismail Khan and Tank.

- 9 For details of the demands of conference, see Khan H. A., 2004, pp.91-92.
- 10 Taj Muhammad Langah was renowned Siraiki lawyer. Later, Langah contributed considerably for the Siraiki cause.
- 11 The Siraiki nationalist parties remained unable to get membership of any provincial or national legislative body.
- 12 Mushtaq Gadi is Islamabad based Siraiki Nationalist. Currently, he is working as lecturer at Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad
- 13 In the district of Muzaffargarh, Siraikis constitute 86.3% ; Punjabis 7.4% and others 6.3%. In Dera Ghazi Khan district, Siraikis are 80.3% ; Punjabis 1.3% and others 18.4%. In Rajanpur district, Siraikis are 75.8% ; Punjabis 3.3% and others 20.9%. In Lodhran district, Siraikis are 69.6% ; Punjabis 18.6% and others 11.8%. In Bahawalpur district, Siraikis (Riyasti Dialect) are 64.3% ; Punjabis 28.4% and others 7.3%. In Layyah district, Siraikis are 62.3% ; Punjabis 32.6% and others 5.1%. In Rahimyarkhan district, Siraikis (Riyasti Dialect) are 62.2% ; Punjabis 27.3% and others 10.5%. In Multan district, Siraikis are 67.67% ; Punjabis 21.64% and others 10.69%. In Vehari district, Siraikis are 11.4% ; Punjabis 82.9% and others 5.7%. In Bahawalnagar district, Siraikis are 1.2% ; Punjabis 94.6% and others 4.2%. In Khanewal district, Siraikis are 5.8% ; Punjabis 81.2% and others 13%. (This data is based on the District Census Reports of 1998).
- 14 Hanif Chaudhry is Multan based Punjabi speaking Intellectual.
- 15 Rasul Baksh Rais is a renowned scholar, columnist and professor of politics at LUMS, Lahore.
- 16 For details of the elections result, see <http://ecp.gov.pk/>
- 17 Tariq Rehman is a renowned scholar and Dean of the school of Education at Beacon House National University, Lahore
- 18 Muhammad Mohsin Leghari is Senator from Dera Ghazi Khan.
- 19 MQM submitted the proposal to exclude the clause 4 of article 239 which says “a bill to amend the constitution which would have the effect of altering the limits of a province shall not be presented to the president for assent unless it has been passed by the provincial assembly of that province by the votes of not less than two-thirds of its total membership”.