

Economics, Politics, and Ethnicity in Balochistan's Transport Industry

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Because of its potential to disrupt economic development, it is necessary to understand the dynamics of ethnic conflict in the contemporary world. A prevalent trend in the study of ethnicity is to focus on the creation and/or maintenance of ethnic identities and mobilisation on the basis of those identities as groups compete for resources, opportunities, or political power in the context of the nation-state [Barth (1969); Brass (1985); Comaroff (1987); Mumtaz (1990)]. In this approach, an ethnic group's distinguishing markers—language, custom, dress, etc.—are treated less as manifestations of tradition which define or create the group and more as arenas of negotiation and contestation in which people strive to realise their practical and symbolic interests. This happens as individuals or families, pursuing their livelihoods with the skills and resources available to them, find (or create) opportunities or obstacles which appear to be based on ethnic criteria. The state can intensify this process as it uses positive or negative discrimination in order to achieve some desired distribution of wealth and opportunity. In turn, political leadership becomes a key in realising the experience of shared ethnic interests. Leadership develops as a kind of dual legitimisation process, i.e., as individuals or organisations seek to be accepted as spokesmen both by members of the group itself and by outsiders.

This paper presents a study of bus transportation in the city of Quetta in order to explore the interaction of economics, ethnicity, and broader national and regional forces in Pakistani Balochistan. It shows not only how the structure of the transport industry affects relations between Baloch and Pushtun, the two main ethnic groups in Balochistan, but also how ethnic relations between the two groups affect the transport industry. Similarly, it suggests that government policies can affect the economic and ethnic dynamics of the transport industry, and also that the structure of the transport industry and the transporters' ties to broader ethnic groups can constrain government policies or efforts towards development. Most of the data for this study was gathered during 1988 when I conducted a study of transporters as part of a more general study of detribalisation and ethnicity in Quetta [Titus (1991)]. For that study I conducted interviews, engaged in participant observation by accompanying two bus crews on

their inter-city routes, and administered a survey to 58 bus owners. On a recent trip to Quetta I was able to bring some of that data up to date through interviews.

Because of its distance from major economic centres, its location on key trade routes, and its largely agricultural economy, road transport assumes a vital role in Balochistan's economy. As Balochistan's only urban centre and the seat of the provincial administration, Quetta is a major trade centre not only because, with a population of approximately one million, it is itself a sizable market, but also because it lies on the main routes from Pakistan to Iran and southern Afghanistan. Agricultural products, handicrafts, and industrial goods flow along those routes, legally and illegally, and Quetta is a major transit point for this trade [see Riaz (1990); Mubashir (1995)]. While the main economic activity of the bus transporters, who are the focus of this study, appears to be the conveyance of passengers, it is widely believed that most also engage in petty smuggling.

My survey of Quetta's transporters revealed that most buses were owned (and often operated by) individuals who had just one or two buses and who paid a commission to a company that sold the tickets for their route. Most transporters function as part of economic units based on the extended family. 34 of the 58 respondents stated that they either owned their bus or buses with relatives or they worked with relatives to operate them.¹ Most transporters said that they lived as part of joint family units in which the mean number of employed adults per household was three. In one-third of these households all income-earners worked on the family's bus or buses. There are, however, a few prominent individuals who own large numbers of buses. Some of these men have further influence in that they also run the companies with which the individual owners affiliate, and some of them also control unions that lobby the provincial government on behalf of transporters. It should also be pointed out, though, that some bus companies are not controlled by large transporters just as some transport unions are not.

To operate a bus in Balochistan, a transporter must have a permit which specifies the route he is entitled to drive and his departure time. In 1988 the government policy was to issue no new permits. Therefore, to enter the transport game one either had to operate illegally or to purchase a permit from someone who already had one. On the best routes, the cost of these permits was nearly equal to that of new buses.² The importance of having a good route permit is revealed by figures from a company, Public Transport, that runs buses from Quetta to Karachi. The trip to Karachi takes 12 hours and most buses leave in the early evening and arrive at their destination in the early morning. Public Transport's receipt books showed that in a 17-day period in September, 1988, the average ticket earnings for the buses

¹ 17 of the respondents stated that they were the sole owner of their bus or buses and 7 stated that they owned theirs with a partner

² For example, the average cost of the buses owned by 21 bus-owners who operated on the Quetta-to-Karachi route was US \$40,000 while the average cost of their route permits was US \$37,000.

leaving Quetta between 1:00 and 3:00 in the afternoon were \$47; while for the buses leaving in the later time slots, the figure was \$136.

Some idea of the economics of bus transportation can be extrapolated from the figures in Table 1 which I obtained when I accompanied the crew of a bus on a trip from Quetta to Karachi and back again. The owner of the bus I accompanied to Karachi is Baloch and a member of the Rakshani tribe. He also owns a bus which he operates on the Quetta-to-Tuftan route, and he bought his buses with money obtained from agricultural land that he and his brother own near the town of Kanuk. On the trip I joined him, the owner did some of the driving though he had a crew of six which included two drivers. A round trip to Karachi takes four days, so a crew on this route makes around eight trips in a month. Each of the employees was paid a monthly

Table 1

Income from a Return Bus Trip from Quetta to Karachi, April 1988

REVENUE		
Quetta-to Karachi		
Freight	Rs 300	(Rs 50 each for six sacks of leeks)
Passengers	Rs 1070	(Rs 80×13 to Karachi, Rs 30×1 to Khuzdar)
Smuggled goods	Rs 1650	(Rs 11 profit per 150 cartons of cigarettes)
Total	Rs 3020	
Karachi-to-Quetta		
Freight	Rs 1414	(Rs 20×36 boxes candy, Rs 13×38 boxes plastic bags, Rs 40×51g. boxes)
Passengers	Rs 2800	(Rs 80×35)
Total	Rs 4214	
TOTAL REVENUE	Rs 7234	
Expenses		
Wages	Rs 1375	(Rs 425 driver 1, Rs 325 driver 2, Rs 175 munshi, Rs 150×3 cleaners)
Fuel	Rs 2000	(Rs 4×500 litres, approximate)
Bribes	Rs 1100	(Rs 100 Customs, Rs 300 Coast Guard, Rs 700 at Sindh border)
Office Commission	Rs 700	(Rs 350 Quetta, Rs 350 Karachi)
Miscellaneous	Rs 200	(Hotel, food, etc., in Karachi)
Total Expenses	Rs 5375	
Income	Rs 1859	

wage plus a certain amount per trip. For example, in 1988 the head driver earned a salary of Rs 1000 plus Rs 300 per trip for a monthly total of Rs 3400 (\$190).³

Eight trips per month at the rate revealed in Table 1 would provide the bus-owner with a monthly income of Rs 14,872 (\$825). The conclusions that can be drawn from this single example are, of course, very limited. There is no way of knowing whether the figures for this trip are typical, nor can the figures be considered net income since they do not include other costs that transporters incur. All transporters have repair costs, for example, and most were buying their buses on instalments (usually at high interest rates) and making monthly payments.⁴ On the revenue side of the equation, there may also be other sources of income that were not apparent to me. One of the drivers on the trip from which the data is taken bought 30 pairs of shoes from a wholesale market in Karachi which he was going to sell in a small shop in his village, for example. This case study and the survey data in general suggest that, even on a highly lucrative route such as Quetta-to-Karachi, owning a bus is a profitable but not highly profitable concern. Some bus-owners who operated on local routes or in the least desirable time slots claimed to be, and likely were, economically marginal.

My recent update of the 1988 economic data showed several changes in the economics of running buses in Balochistan. In general, inflation had affected the industry. The cost of diesel fuel had risen from Rs 4 per litre to Rs 6.25 per litre, and the wages paid to drivers had risen from an average of Rs 3,000 to an average of Rs 7,000 (\$165 to \$225 in current dollar amounts). The transporters seem to have been able to pass much of the increase on to their passengers since fares have also gone up; the fare to Karachi having risen from Rs 80 to Rs 150, for example. A change in technology has also increased the level of investment required to purchase a bus. Formerly most buses were modified from British-made Bradford chassis and bodies. Now they are exclusively Japanese-made Hinos. The Hinos are larger, and consequently more expensive. New buses, such as those on the Quetta-to-Karachi route cost an average of Rs 725,000 (\$40,000) in 1988 whereas new Hino buses currently cost around Rs 1,700,000 (\$55,000). Another significant change in the industry, as described below in more detail, is that the government's policy is now to issue new route permits. Consequently, their value has dropped considerably.

The workings of the transport industry in Balochistan can only be understood in the context of the region's ethnic landscape. Quetta lies in the boundary zone between the northern portion of the province which is overwhelmingly Pushtun and

³The conversion rate used in this article for 1988 is US \$1 = Rs 18, and for 1995 US \$1 = Rs 31. In rupee terms, by March 1995 wages had more than doubled from when the original data were collected. This transporter was now paying his head driver Rs 2000 in wages and Rs 500 per trip for a monthly salary of Rs 8000 (US \$260 at the current exchange rate).

⁴Among the surveyed transporters who were buying their buses on instalments in 1988, the average monthly payment was Rs 10,000 (US \$555).

the southern part which is overwhelmingly Baloch. This spatial configuration of ethnicity means that Pushtun control what has been the most lucrative trade/smuggling route into Balochistan, that from Qandahar to Quetta via Chaman. On the other hand, the route from the Iranian border to Quetta traverses Baloch ethno-territory, as do all major routes from Quetta to Pakistan's major urban centres. Because members of both groups have large financial stakes in transportation, ethnicity pervades the industry in Balochistan. While there is considerable cooperation between members of the two groups, twice in the last decade, in 1986 and 1988, the large open-air bus stand in Quetta was the site of rioting between Baloch and Pushtun which spread to other parts of the city [see Titus (1995)].

The cultural geography of Balochistan in large part determines the ethnicity of those who operate buses in the region. Virtually all buses in Balochistan appear to be owned and are certainly operated by Baloch and Pushtun. The general pattern is that Baloch own and operate the buses that ply the routes in Baloch territory and Pushtun operate those in Pushtun territory but there are important exceptions. Inter-city bus routes from Quetta can be divided into three categories, local, intermediate, and long-distance. On local routes, buses operate out of villages within a 30–40 mile radius of the city, leaving the village early in the day and returning in the late afternoon. Intermediate routes are longer and take two days to complete while long-distance routes (those from Quetta to Karachi, Tuftan, and Peshawar) take from four to eight days to complete. While Pushtun operate the buses running from local Pushtun villages and Baloch operate those from Baloch villages, on intermediate and long-term routes Pushtun operate buses in Baloch areas. On the Karachi route, for example, around half the buses I surveyed were owned by Pushtun, and I was told by a clerk who sells tickets for the buses to Tuftan that around a third of the buses operating on that route are owned by Pushtun. Thus, bus transportation in Balochistan is a potentially profitable but highly competitive enterprise, and the cultural geography of the region creates the potential for that competition to take on an ethnic complexion.

A factor which contributes to the intensification of ethnic identities in the transport industry is political leadership in the form of transport unions which transporters have formed to lobby the government. The types of issues these unions concern themselves with is illustrated by a list of demands of one such union, the Afghan Itehad Bus Owners (AIBO),⁵ which appeared in the Quetta edition of the Urdu newspaper *Jang*, on January 28, 1988. The AIBO demanded that bus stands be built in several towns in northern Balochistan; that the bus stand in Quetta be cleaned and more adequately supplied with water and electricity; that customs agents stop their corrupt practices; and that the Quetta Municipal Authority regulate illegal pick-up trucks and mini buses. The threat that transport unions can use to add weight to

⁵In this case "Afghan" refers to Pushtun, not to inhabitants of Afghanistan

their demands is the transporters' strike or *pehiya jam*. In March 1995, for example, transport unions in Makran threatened to block the highway between Quetta and Karachi unless the police and customs officials stop harassing them and their passengers.

Government policies in large part determine the conditions in which both transporters and transport unions operate. Recent efforts by the provincial government to change its policy regarding route permits illustrate how transport unions can assert themselves when they are challenged. In 1993 the government changed its policy of not issuing new route permits. The Provincial Transport Authority's reason for issuing new permits was to alleviate overcrowding, and in response to the transporters' claims that profit margins are already low on many routes, the Secretary of the PTA stated that purchasing a bus is a major investment and only those who foresaw some profit in it would make the investment. When the PTA issued new bus permits, however, the transport unions demanded that they be rescinded and no new ones be issued. Following negotiations with the PTA and elected officials it was agreed that some new permits would be issued and that the transport unions would have a say in how they are to be allocated. This policy has resulted in the lowered price for permits mentioned above.

Government policies also influence ethnic politics in the transport industry. The provincial government in Balochistan pursued a very different policy than did that in the NWFP in regard to the role Afghan refugees were allowed to play in transportation, for example. Unlike in the NWFP, refugees were not allowed to purchase the route permits which allow individuals to legally run buses in Balochistan. This policy has meant that transport in Balochistan has been the prerogative of Pakistanis and an arena in which their interests have clashed. As I describe in detail elsewhere [Titus (1995)], the ethnic riots which erupted in Quetta's bus stand in 1986 were the direct consequence of a rivalry between the individuals at the head of two transport unions, one of whom was Baloch and the other of whom was Pushtun. Previous to those riots, the membership of the transport unions was ethnically mixed, but following them, an exclusively Pushtun transport union was formed.

Finally, it is necessary to examine how relations between ethnic groups in the broader society affect the dynamics of the transport sector, and vice versa. In the case of the 1986 transport riots, it is clear that events in the transport industry affected those in the community. Rioting spread from the bus stand to other parts of Quetta, and after the riots ethnic polarisation occurred between Baloch and Pushtun not only in the transport industry but at the level of city politics as well. On the other hand, tensions among Baloch and Pushtun in other arenas helped create the climate in which the riots at the bus stand took place. The sources of tension in the early 1980s included splits in the political movement (the National Awami Party), which formally united Baloch and Pushtun, competition for positions in the institutions of the state

(e.g., the universities, the bureaucracy, and the provincial assembly), and the presence of Afghan refugees which has focused demographic pressure on Baloch.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, new forces have begun to act on the social and political life of Balochistan. While there have always been divisions among Baloch and Pushtun along tribal and political lines, in recent years those divisions have intensified as a result of increased competition over the resources and opportunities available through the Pakistani state. At the tribal level, bloody factional disputes have broken out among lineages within some tribes (prominent cases include the Bugtis, Magssis, Rinds, and Achakzais) and serious feuding between different tribes (notably the Raisanis versus the Rinds and Bugtis) has also erupted. The actual events which have triggered many of these feuds have been local and provincial electoral contests. Political rivalries have also led to splits in the Baloch nationalist ranks. The Baloch National Movement (BNM) has split into two factions, for example. On a wider scale, the disputes involving the Raisanis could also be read as a manifestation of wider tensions between Brahui- and Balochi-speakers who until now have been joined under the common umbrella of the Baloch ethnic identity.

A recent dispute involving the Marri tribe demonstrates how divisions among Baloch can affect transporters. Because its current location has led to traffic congestion in the city, in 1990 the provincial government developed a plan to shift the bus stand to Quetta's outskirts. According to the current head of the Balochistan Development Authority, nearly \$7 million were spent on purchasing land southwest of the city and on the initial phases of construction. In 1992, however, the provincial government settled members of the Balochi-speaking Marri tribe who had been living in Afghanistan on lands adjacent to the site. The Marris then asserted claims to the site of the bus stand as well and prevented construction from continuing. When, in early 1995, the government began to push ahead with work on the bus stand, the Marri nawab, as head of a newly-created political party, Baloch Haq Tawar, called for Baloch to oppose construction. He argued that building the bus stand at the proposed site would allow the encroachment of Pushtuns into Baloch areas. The opinion of Baloch on the matter is split, however. Members of the Brahui-speaking Shawani tribe who own the land surrounding the proposed site support the construction as do some Baloch transporters. When the Baloch Haq Tawar called for a transporters' strike in March to protest construction, it was largely ineffective, though work on the new bus stand has not resumed.

Because economic development always takes place in contexts in which individuals and groups have competing interests, even unquestionably beneficial projects such as the development of infrastructure can cause tensions among those who make use of that infrastructure. This paper has shown some of the ways in which competition in the transportation sector affects relations between ethnic groups in Balochistan. The interests of individual transporters competing for passengers, the

interests of large transporters seeking influence in the industry, and the interests of aspiring political leaders can interact in complex ways to intensify ethnic identities.

While this paper has focused on competition and conflict, it is important to remember that, on a daily basis, members of different ethnic groups and tribes also cooperate with one another to conduct their business in Balochistan's transport industry. It is in the negotiation of shared and opposed interests, of difference and similarity, that people pursue their interests as members of ethnic groups and as Pakistanis. In order for development to succeed, it is important to pay attention to the details of how that negotiation takes place.

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