

Why not to condemn the Ziarat attack - Balochistan is more important than a building

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There is something off when amongst two incidents of terrorism in Balochistan; one in which a building was destroyed, the other in which 25 people, including 15 girl students, were killed, the most grief expressed is for the building. The attack on medical students and a hospital are mentioned only as an afterthought.

The building was a 19th century colonial resort in Ziarat that Governor General Muhammad Ali Jinnah chose to live at as he recovered from what would be a fatal tuberculosis infection. The other attack was a suicide bombing of a bus carrying female medical students of the Sardar Bahadur Khan Women's University, followed by a hostage situation and holdout at the Bolan Medical College.

The first attack was claimed by the Baloch Liberation Army, a militia run by Baloch nationalist, attributed to the self-exiled Harbiyar Marri. The second attack was claimed by the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, an anti-Shia militia once considered close to the establishment. When the federal leadership, Interior Minister Ch Nisar Ali Khan and Information Minister Pervaiz Rasheed spoke on the issue, they issued "warning to young Baloch who pick up arms" and condemned the Ziarat attack, without mentioning the LeJ at all. The two subsequently flew to Ziarat, missing the funeral of the Quetta attack victims and failing to visit the site.

The visit caught the ire of the Pakthunkhwa Milli Awami Party (PkMAP), a nationalist party that is not known for desiring separation from Pakistan, whose general secretary suggested that the "ministers should have instead attended the funeral of the victims of Saturday's attacks in Quetta claimed by the banned sectarian extremist group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi".

What makes a so-called national symbol more important than real citizens who die at the hands of a sectarian group? Commenting on the PkMAP leader's words, a report in a national English daily began with the words: "While the entire nation is in a state of shock over the destruction of Jinnah's Residency in Ziarat, a key coalition partner in the Balochistan government calls it a 'symbol of slavery.'" The logic implied is that the PKMaP leadership and its position on the Ziarat Residency falls outside what the "entire nation" is supposed to believe.

The PkMAP General Secretary Akram Shah had continued to make a fairly clear remark: "The wooden house at Ziarat was a symbol of slavery as it was built for the colonial British officer Sir Robert Groves Sandeman who ruled Balochistan until his death in 1892. The house always reminded the Baloch and Pashtuns of the long period when they were the slaves of British Empire in Indian subcontinent. For us, it's no more than the house of the then agent to the Governor General [of India], Sir Sandeman." Should the PkMAP general secretary's words be taken with a pinch of salt or should they be taken seriously?

In order to do so, we need to look at the history of the Ziarat Regency. Originally built in 1892, the Ziarat Residency became home to the British Governor-General's Agent to Balochistan Sir Robert

Groves Sandeman. Sandeman, whom no one chooses to remember was responsible for the British colonial policy of dealing with Balochistan. Based on dividing Balochistan into the Khan of Kalat's territory and the tribal territories, Balochistan was denied the status of a full province. A treaty was negotiated with the Khan of Kalat which laid down the relationship of Balochistan to the centre.

The policy was maintained almost de facto by the Pakistani state after partition. Maintaining the divide between 'civilised' citizens and 'uncivilised' citizens, Balochistan continued to be ruled by an agent of the Pakistan government until it was finally declared a province in 1970. It must be recalled that Baloch nationalist history recalls that 1948, the year Jinnah passed his last days at the residency, was also the year in which Jinnah reportedly ordered an army operation to "force Balochistan to cede to Pakistan".

If it be remembered, the Ziarat Residency was not even a declared heritage site before 1975. It was only when Zulfikar Ali Bhutto had dismissed the National Awami Party (NAP) government in Balochistan and the Pakistan Army launched another military operation against the third Baloch insurgency that the Pakistani State remembered the Ziarat Residency and re-titled it the Quaid-e-Azam Residency. By declaring the Ziarat Residency a "national heritage site", the state "marked" the territory with its identity, and put a claim on a two-month period in the history of the Residency.

What the Ziarat Residency signified to the many different peoples that inhabit Pakistan remained contested. This is why the Residency was bombed. The bombing itself did not have a tangible target. The message delivered by the BLA was 'symbolic'. In the press release that followed, the BLA called upon "their Pashtun brothers to build a monument in tribute to Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan and Abdul Samad Achakzai". It also said that the bombing was representative of their position on the "talks" proposed under the National Party Chief Minister Dr Abdul Malik.

Much of the romance around the Ziarat Residency reeks of continuing colonial attitudes. Articles and news features in tribute to the building have spoken of how "it was a hill station surrounded by juniper trees". The "fresh air" and "greenery" are said to be its main charms. But somehow the fact that it was the seat at which Balochistan's first coloniser, the British, exercised their power was ignored.

Another article cites, "For those living in other provinces, the residency was nothing short of an emblem of Balochistan itself. This was not just confined to a sentimental association with the country's founder, but the residency's image also adorns Rs100 notes, making it part of everyday life in Pakistan." Is this description not the problem in itself?

The fact that our relationship to Balochistan be mediated through a building instead of a real and equal relationship with the Baloch people is the problem. Should the government's response to the attack not have been to insist upon creating a functional and equal relationship with the Baloch people, instead of insisting that the Ziarat Residency will be rebuilt within three months?

'Heritage' is always a contested issue. Historian Benedict Anderson's old adage that "nations are imagined communities" requires repetition. Because national heritage is something that the state tries to impose on people, some (significant) groups continue to contest it. This contestation is fairly obvious in Pakistan. Statements by the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) leadership insisting that the "PkMAP general secretary had offended the millions of patriotic Baloch" are quite meaningless. The so-called trust of the Baloch in the Pakistani state can be determined from the low turnout in the 2013 General Elections. The percentage of votes cast in six Baloch districts remained below 15 percent. That the PkMAP actually won the NA seat from Ziarat and still felt it necessary not to condemn the Ziarat Residency attack requires contemplation in this context.

Moreover, if the same sentiments of 'national heritage' are to be consistently employed, then much more tears need to be shed regarding the over 2,000-year-old Hinglaj Temples, threatened not by Baloch nationalists, but the Hingol Dam being constructed by the Pakistan government against local opposition which calls on it to "preserve heritage and ecology". Heritage formation is selective and exclusive: the state handpicks "heritage symbols" which affirm the nationalist historical narrative. The question is: where and how do we form our opinion about an event from?

Personally, I do not see much tactical or symbolic purpose gained from the BLA attack on the Ziarat Residency. But the question is whether I mourn the loss of the building more than I mourn the situation in Balochistan?

That Jinnah stayed at a certain location does not make it sacred. If so there are a few apartments in London and Bombay that the Pakistani state needs to declare 'national heritage' too. This is not the point. Rather it is that the discourse around the two attacks shows the skewed vision with which we look at events. The Quetta attack shows once again that Balochistan is burning, but it is only the burning of the Ziarat Regency that most of the media and national politicians chose to care about, even trying to suggest that both attacks were by the BLA, despite the LeJ admission.

The bombing of the residency at Ziarat is not the biggest issue in Balochistan. One must speak about missing persons, the 'kill-and-dump' and elections held under military occupation before one begins to speak about a destroyed building. Living people must take precedence over buildings. If not Balochistan will continue to burn as we spend all our energies trying to reconstruct the Ziarat Regency "exactly as it was before".

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