The Uyghurs of Xinjiang: Politics of Identity and Internal Colonialism

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Abstract: *The Uyghurs are the aboriginal people of Central Asia, and constitute an ethnic Turkish Muslim minority group in China's North Western region, known as Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) or East Turkestan as many Uyghurs prefer to identify it. Current trajectory of Uyghur nationalism makes it clear that the Uyghurs have been resisting the dominant Chinese nationalism narrative since the mid-20th century CE because of their own perception of nationhood. Due to their ethno-religious minority status they are being continuously discriminated socially and economically in Chinese society. The Uyghurs both in physical and ethnic set up are distinguishable from the dominant Han people. This study is an attempt to understand the Uyghurs problem not only from the nationalism perspective but also from a new understanding of internal colonialism. It tries to uncover the factors that are equally responsible for the Uyghurs' demand of right to self-rule. In this aspect, three different perspectives have been employed. Firstly, to locate the question of Uyghurs' identity from their peripheral position in Chinese society; secondly, from the perspective of the dominant Chinese nationalists, in other words, Sinicization of minorities; thirdly, to make sense on the issue from perspective of internal colonialism.*

Keywords: *Uyghurs, Xinjiang, Identity politics, Right to self-rule, Sinicization, Assimilation, Internal colonialism.*

Introduction

Identity matters in society and politics. Both as an empirical and theoretical subject, identity, has implications in an individual's or a group's social and

political foundations. Everybody or every group wants to have a specific individual or collective identity and both are immensely significant in society and politics. Identity is not always a 'private matter' and a 'private worry' (Bauman 2009: 4). Identity becomes an issue, when it is challenged. For this reason it is often considered in the light of 'identity crisis' rather than merely identity. Identity implies how we perceive ourselves and how we are being construed by the others. Identity becomes important for getting socially desirable goals through making a feeling of shared identity, solidarity, or collectiveness. Identities such as, linguistic, ethnic and religious, that are collective in nature, tend to determine the fate of identity based groups and generate social and political outcomes. We can perceive the Uyghur (also spelt as Uighur) problem through the prism of identity based politics. This issue covers both a 'politics of domination' from the end of Chinese state and a 'politics of recognition' from the end of the Uyghurs. Both are the 'post-materialist' politics. Here identity of the Uyghurs is both subject and object. As a subject the Uyghurs are looking for their own State based on their own ethno-religious identity. As an object Uyghur identity is being exploited for forced assimilation with Chinese nationalist identity and it is a form of cultural genocide (Finnegan 2020). The Uyghur question has not only been outcome of some complex dominant-marginal equations in China, but also affects China's relationship with Central Asian states and Middle East. In case of China, "ethnicity is a negotiated process and minorities are active agents in the negotiation of their ethnic identities" (as quoted in Baranovitch 2003: 726).

The Uyghurs are the aboriginal people of Central Asia, and constitute an ethnic Turkish Muslim minority group in China's North Western region; better known as Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) or East Turkestan as many Uyghurs prefers to call it. Historically the Uyghurs formed the largest population group in the Central Asia and constitute an ethnic Turkish Muslim minority group in China's North Western region; better known as Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) or East Turkestan as many Uyghurs prefers to call it. Historically the Uyghurs formed the largest population group in the Central Asia and the largest minority group in Xinjiang region. Their contributions to Asian literature, medicine, architecture, music, songs, dance, and fine arts, are noteworthy. For centuries Uyghur Kingdom was a major Central Asian Buddhist cultural center. During the 10th century CE, Wang Yande, a messenger of the Sung dynasty, was overwhelmed by the high level of civilization he found in the kingdom (Kamberi 2015: 9). The modern history of the Uyghurs revolves around

two Islamic city states Kashgar and Khotan, ruled by caliphs (Dillion, 2020). In the late 16th century CE, Khojas, under the legendary Afaq Khoja, replaced the Sufi order and became the Uyghurs' spiritual leader. (Dillion 2020). During this period Qing dynasty was the ruling house of China. With the assistance of Mongolian allies and Han community, Qing rulers were able to occupy East Turkestan and included the same within the territory of the Chinese Empire.

Nonetheless there was resistance to reclaim the sovereignty of the region. The most successful resistance was led by Yakub Beg. With the help of strong military forces, he set up an independent government in Kashgar but his regime was overthrown in 1878 by the Qing armies with the help of Turkic local elites and Eastern Turkestan was formally incorporated into the mainland China in 1884 (Dillion 2020).After the decline of Qing Dynasty, Uyghurs again attempted to reestablish sovereignty over East Turkestan. They even succeed briefly in establishing the Republic of East Turkestan. But in 1949 Communist troops entered Xinjiang and consolidated its control over Xinjiang by sending retired ethnic Han Chinese soldiers into Xinjiang. These new units were called "Production and Construction" Corps and they were part of the Chinese government tactic of assimilating ethnic Han Chinese migrants and with other ethnic minority groups (Mcneal and Dumbaugh 2002). As a result Han population in Xinjiang increased significantly from 6 percent to approximately 40 to 45 percent of Xinjiang's total population.

The "land of the Uyghurs", the largest Autonomous Region of China, today includes the Tarim, Junghar, and Turpan basins of central Asia. The Uyghur region shares its borders with Mongolia, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tibet, and India. Currently all the Central Asian states are pursuing the policy of indifference regarding the Uyghurs keeping in mind China's considerable influence in terms of trade and business prospects in the region. Though a large number of Uighur population had settled in Central Asian States during Muslim revolts of 1860, but Central Asian States have adopted 'selective silence' strategy to de-legitimize the Uighur movement. Not only these Central Asian States have rejected human right violations reports but they have termed such reports as western propaganda. Kazakh President Qassym-Jomart Tokayev in his exclusive interview with German news agency told that those reports did not reflect reality and were politically engineered to disturb the peace and harmony in the Central Asian region (Mirovalev 2020).

Turkish leaderships in this case have shown exemplary courage by granting political asylum to the Uyghur nationalists. Uyghurs share close cultural,

linguistic and ethnic affinities with people of Ankara, the capital of Turkey. Therefore Beijing's treatment towards this community impacted negatively on Turkish Government about China. China considers it as an internal matter of China. Intervention in this issue by any other external institutions, organizations, and other states is not welcomed by China. At the same time China also is afraid of sensitizing about the Uyghur problems at regional and global level. China knows very well that it will tarnish their image and put a dark stain in their already damaged and weak human rights statistics and reports (Chaziza, 2016).

Before investigating the legitimate claims of Uyghurs right to self-rule, we need to understand the attitudes, behaviour, sentiments of the Uyghur community and their interaction with the dominant Han Chinese. It describes whether the Uyghurs are assimilating the dominant Han culture or resisting and altogether rejecting Han's dominance. Historically, it is known that the Uyghurs had been converted from Buddhism to Islam in the 10th to 12th centuries CE. They are being continuously discriminated socially and economically in Chinese society because of their ethno-religious minority status. Uyghurs both in physical and ethnic set up are distinguishable from the Han people. Their dialect as well as their language has much affinity with the Central Asian states and Turkey than that of proper Chinese region. Due to their distinguishable traits and Chinese ambition of a homogenous nation, Han people equate Uyghurs and their culture as primitive, barbaric and as a hindrance to achieve national solidarity (Kaltman 2007). Subsequently in the matrix of the Chinese society Han exerts significant influence in terms of availing social, economic and political benefits. Additionally, government policies and actions are framed keeping in mind of Han interests often excluding the minorities' interests. As a result, the very idea of a strong Chinese nation differs among Han people and other minorities. Han people equate nationalism with national pride and upholding the values of Chinese nationalism, while the minorities argue for an inclusive nation.

The focus of earlier studies on Uyghurs was mainly limited to nationalism and Chinese assimilation tactics against minorities (Akimbek 1998; Bovingdon 2010; Clarke 2015; Kaltman 2007). Longstanding problems of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang may be viewed from following three academic points instead of perceiving them solely from nationalistic perspective. These are; firstly, to interpret the Uyghur issue from the Uyghur's perspective; secondly, to understand this issue from dominant perspective of China i.e. Sinicization of minorities; and thirdly, with an attempts to understand the whole gamut of Uyghurs problem from a new understanding of internal colonialism.

Dominance, Marginalization and Resistance: Narrating the Uyghur Identity Politics

Unlike any other minorities in China, the Uyghurs lack strong political leadership around the globe, adequate networking, and proper communication to sensitize the Chinese oppression (Akimbek 1998). As a result, the issues of the Uyghurs have failed to articulate and achieve sufficient international and regional supports from intellectuals, political leaders as well as human rights activists globally. The systematic structural violence by the Chinese Government to dislodge any dissenting voices among the Uyghurs also contributes significantly for this lack of leadership among them.

In spite of being a multi-ethnic society both historically and socially, People's Republic of China (PRC)'s policies are striving towards achieving a strong homogenous nation by forcefully assimilating minor ethnic cultures within the dominant framework of Han ethnic group. According to the Uyghurs, the Chinese government's repressive policies and measures are the part of their attempt to promote Han centric Chinese nation. Chinese leaders have rejected this claim, arguing that the Uyghurs are an inseparable part of the unitary multi-ethnic Chinese nation. Historically Xinjiang as a region shares much closer affinity with its close neighboring regions of Central Asia, Russia, Mongolia, etc. than that of China proper in the realm of linguistics, culture and ethnicity. Likewise, politically Chinese control and dominance over Xinjiang region remained insignificant for a longer period of time. It is only after the conquest of the Qing dynasty in the mid-18th century CE onwards Chinese state gained limited control over the region. Followed by various rebellions and political turmoil, Turkic-Muslim people started demanding for greater political rights and independence from the Chinese control (Clarke 2015). On the other hand, the Uyghurs claim that their history of living in modern day Xinjiang dates back to 6000 years ago and they have been a part of various independent states even before the Chinese established control over this region (Bovingdon 2010: 25). In 1949, Chinese government recognized the territorial unit of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) and guaranteed Uyghurs' right to self-rule. In reality Chinese state has tactfully constructed a model of governance that not only deprives the Uyghurs from their political rights but also obscures their political space required for debates and discussions on the issues of public interests. At this point the status of autonomy is a bit questionable here. An *autonomous* region enjoys certain degree of *autonomy* and also freedom of choice from an external authority. But the Chinese notion of regional autonomy remains questionable. Not only for Uyghurs but also in case of Inner Mongolia,

and Tibet, the Communist Party of China (CPC) never provides them the prospect of governing themselves. Now we can understand why the Uyghurs are asking for their right to self-determination. In this aspect we will try to understand the demands from both historical and legal perspectives. From 1949 onwards, PRC's attempts to integrate Xinjiang region (East Turkestan as claimed by Uyghurs) with the mainland China has more or less been driven by forceful compulsion rather than respecting the Uyghurs' consent. Even today many Uyghurs believe that when PRC took control over the Xinjiang region, the Chinese Government promised that it will take every possible actions to preserve and promote the distinct culture of Uyghurs. But the Chinese government failed to uphold their promises. XUAR like the Tibet Autonomous Region is victim of structural violence and deprivations. From the legal point of view, both 1952 programme for *Minzu*[1] Regional Autonomy as well as 1954 Constitution made it clear that autonomous units will have a system of governance similar to the corresponding levels found in mainland China (Bovingdon 2010: 47). However, the articles of the autonomy laws are framed in such a way that fulfills the wishes of the dominant Han. Article 20 of the autonomy law allows autonomous regional governments to frame statutes and provisions for their people. But Article 19 empowers the National People's Congress to nullify such provisions and statutes made by the autonomous governments (Bovingdon 2010: 48). Therefore it is very clear that Chinese state has offered limited legislative power to the autonomous regions. The system empowers autonomous regions to formulate policies as long as it complies with the influential narratives of both the Han and the CPC. The Uyghurs believe that their claims are legitimate as an ethnic minority with socio-cultural distinctiveness. They have every right to protect their own culture. The Uyghurs also claim that in spite of remaining under Chinese rule for a long time, Chinese leaders are not accepting any of their demands. Right from the incorporation of the XUAR to the China proper, Uyghurs' political status have been deteriorated as 'second class citizens'. At the beginning, CPC persued policies such as promising them material prosperity, improving their quality of life and providing religious, political and social freedoms to them in order to integrate the Uyghurs into the mainland China. Nevertheless, Chinese leaders never fulfilled their demands and a large proportion of Uyghurs remained neglected and suppressed. Most significantly Chinese policies remain highly discriminatory in nature and often the ethnic groups are not even considered in the national developmental goals of the government. China in their official white papers is celebrating the existence of diverse ethnic groups, but this is only for the Chinese government's attempt to

brainwash international community. From the Uyghurs perspective, Chinese government's hard line policies to control the region have developed due to two important reasons. First, from geo-strategic perspective XUAR locates as a Eurasian crossroads that shares borders with Russia, Mongolia and the Central Asian states. Second, XUAR possesses huge reserves of natural resources that greatly improves the economic viability of the region.

If minority ethnic communities are satisfied with their level of political participation in the political system, then there is less possibility of separatist movement. Representation of the Uyghurs in political activities are essentially limited and controlled.[2] They enjoy fewer rights in comparison to the ordinary Han citizens. They are not encouraged to involve in political activities. Their representations as well as their representatives are determined by the Central Committee of the CPC. Here one of the most intriguing aspects is that all the policies and actions regarding the Uyghurs are framed without even consulting them. In spite of being a stakeholder of the Government's policies and directives, their consents are taken for granted. In case of the Uyghurs, any political actions which are against the dominant Han culture and the communist ideology are treated as separatist movements. The Uyghur students and intellectuals are always regarded with suspicion. The Uyghurs are denied the basic freedom of speech and expressions that are available for common Han citizens. As a result, the Uyghur students and intellectuals are often victimized by Chinese military and police forces. Due to China's repressive actions from 1990s onwards Uyghurs' demand for right to self-rule intensified in Xinjiang. After the 1990, Baren uprising and the 1996 Yining protest, a series of unrests occurred throughout Xinjiang. According to Bhattacharya (2003) these social unrests signified three things. First, increasing use of violence in Uyghur movements which were absent before. In 1986 Uyghurs from the southern Kashgar joined the anti-Communist jihad in Afghanistan. Various foreign groups transformed the silent protest of the Uyghurs into a violent one. Uyghur separist groups began to receive guns, money to continue their protest against the Chinese State. Secondly, Uyghur movements which was mainly confined within XUAR extended into the Chinese mainland. Third, the concept of political *jihad* also penetrated into Uyghur movements. The East Turkistan Islamic Party and its leader Zahiden Yusuf used *jihad* as a political mean to achieve statehood. Because of such activities Chinese authorities linked all social protests with Islamic fundamentalism.

Racial relationship between the dominant Hans and Uyghurs has been marked by mutual distrust and hatred. Uyghurs are against the idea of state-led

reallocation of Han people in XUAR as it greatly affected Uyghurs' employment and educational prospects. In spite of living in this region for centuries the Uyghurs remain the most deprived and poor people in the Chinese society. They have been denied to access basic education, employment opportunities. Even the various aid packages from International bodies intended for the development of the Uyghurs are used for the Hans. Similarly, Chinese policy of reallocation of the Hans to XUAR region develops distrust among the Uyghurs. Chinese state are offering lucrative offers and prospects to the Han people to relocate to XUAR. The Chinese government aspires to take control of the land of the Uyghurs and force them to accept the dominant Han narrative.

Homogeneity or Cultural Diversity: Interpreting Chinese Policies towards the Uyghurs

China's expanding commercial and oil interests in Central Asia region are presenting challenges to both Russia and U.S. (Rashid 1998). Central Asia's oil reserves are important for China not only to counter United States strategic influence and secure its hegemonic position but China is also concerned about economic development and employment in its separatist inclined Xinjiang Province which share close proximity to Central Asian countries. Islamic fundamentalism as well as easy availability of arms have threatened Chinese dream of 'one strong Chinese nation'. China responded to these developments by increasing trade and investments in Central Asian states. In return, Central Asian states have been advised by China to stay out of Beijing's ruthless campaign against the Uyghurs in Xinjiang.

Xinjiang province is one of the most volatile, politically disputed and contested area with a history of continuous political and social movements, demand for separation from mainland China and protracted struggle for greater autonomy with a substantial population of Turkic and Muslims (Starr 2015). Also XUAR offers a distinctive cultural heritage which differs from mainland China and geographically this area is very close to West and Central Asia rather than mainland China. So it remains imperative to develop a comprehensive understanding of the region with myths and facts associated with it.

For the Chinese State, Xinjiang always remained an internal part of the mainland China due to its geo-strategic position and availability of premium quality natural resources. Also Xinjiang region offers ample incentives for China to employ efficient population control measures in mainland Chinese region. Right from its inception as an autonomous region in 1955, China claimed its control

over the region. Disputes arises behind the name and the history of the region. Chinese State legitimize its claim by tracing back the Chinese historical records dates back to 2000 years ago. In historical sources the term *Xiyu* refers to the land which is identical with the modern day Xinjiang (Xiong 2006:204). *Xiyu* became Xinjiang (literal meaning is new borders or frontiers) in the 18th century CE upon its annexation under the Qing Dynasty. Chinese authors and leaderships are fabricating the history of Xinjiang to deny Uyghurs' right to self-rule. Propaganda and state media sources are used extensively for this purpose.

Policies and actions of the Chinese state in the autonomous regions are guided by achieving long term political stability, focusing on comprehensive development and improving the quality of governance to achieve the lofty goal of a strong Chinese nation. For a long time, Afghanistan's civil war, domestic turmoil in Tajikistan, ongoing ethnic conflicts in the adjoining border areas and rise of Islamic fundamentalism compelled Chinese State to take strict and punitive policy measures to dislodge its effects on its domestic sphere (Godbole 2019; Rashid 1998). Chinese State is incorporating a nationwide centralized, authoritative network with strong communist leadership into the framework of national security (Godbole 2019). From this perspective we can argue that the Uyghurs, Mongols, Tibetans and any other ethnic minorities who are demanding separation from the mainland China are seen with suspicion. PRC from 1949 onwards, adopted integrationist approach to deal with its ethnic minorities. PRC is extending its sphere of influence politically, socially and economically over its non-ethnic Han group in Xinjiang region. In the following years of Cultural Revolution, Chinese position against non-ethnic Han culture became stringent. The intended focus was to destroy cultural diversity and plurality in the Chinese society. Differences in opinion led to differential treatments. Minorities who have resisted Chinese oppressive policies and leadership were put to death without fair judicial trial. There was virtually no public forum available for the non-ethnic groups to articulate their demands. Chinese leadership in this phase were actively involved in the destruction of religious places such as mosques and Muslims were compelled to raise pigs in order to fasten up the process of assimilation (Bovingdon 2010: 52). From 1970's onwards Chinese hard line policies were relaxed for a certain time, Chinese leadership followed minority friendly policies. Reasons were that due to China's hard line policies the region became politically unstable often resulting in bloody riots, loss of daily business transactions of the Chinese state, and also increased the risk of fresh demands for separation. But from 1980 onwards China adopted the policy of assimilation. Due to this, Chinese State intensified its targeting of minorities such as Uyghurs and

their freedom of speech and expression were curbed on a regular basis. Chinese state started cracking down Uyghur leaders and their religious activities were suspended. At the same time in order to restrict foreign support coming from adjoining border areas, Chinese State offered lucrative economic and diplomatic opportunities to countries like Pakistan and Central Asian states (Meyer 2016). The Baren Township riot in April, 1990 between Uyghurs and Chinese government deteriorated the inter-ethnic relations in Xinjiang region. According to Chinese sources the uprising was initiated by the Uyghur militants armed with advanced weaponry. PRC cited ethnic separatism and religious propaganda were the major motives behind this uprising. But according to Zeydin Yusup, the leader of the East Turkistan Islamic Party, this movement was held to stop the mass immigration of Han Chinese into Xinjiang and illegal prosecutions of local Uyghurs population. Following the independence of Central Asian States in 1991, Uyghur nationalist leaders started demanding one for themselves. In order to counter-balance separatist movements, Chinese leadership adopted two-prolonged policy. Firstly, Chinese state thought of striking a demographic balance between Uyghurs and Hans to reduce the power of Turkic speaking Uyghurs in the region. Secondly Chinese leadership adopted Strike hard campaign (*Yan Da)* not only at national level but also at the local level. Under this campaign hundreds of Uyghurs were detained, many religious places of worship were declared illegal, police and military forces were used to suppress the dissenting voices, religious books and magazines were banned.(Choudhary 2002). From 1990 onwards China adopted the politics of unease to weaken Uyghurs nationalism and its religious practices. Chinese state argued that religious fundamentalism, ethnic separatism and terrorism in the Xinjiang region threaten the security of the state (Meyer 2016). In 2007 Chinese authorities again raided Xinjiang on the grounds of terrorist activities. Eighteen people were killed, many suspects were arrested and explosives were seized. Chinese authorities used this incident to draw links between the Uyghurs and international terrorist forces. To Chinese authorities these separatist activities of the Uyghur Muslims present challenges to China's mainland security (Davis 2008). Chinese state even went further to draw international audiences to declare Uyghur movements as terrorist activities. So Beijing justified its actions and stringent policies against the Uyghur nationalist leaders as counter-terrorist measures. In spite of allegation of human rights abuses and illegal detention of the innocent Uyghurs, China officially denied any of this wrong doings. Today China maintains the position that there are no detention camps functioning in the region. Rather Uyghurs are sent to political camps in order to empower them

politically and socially. Thus Beijing claims that they are focused on building an inclusive society where diversity and differences are cherished. However, network surveillance is used extensively in the region to monitor the activities of the Uyghurs. In recent times Xi administration has adopted extreme measures to punish ethnic and religious minorities. The ulterior aim is to weaken the ethnic minority's separate identity to assimilate them into a Han-dominated society. Recently Xi Jinping's government withdraw preferential policies for ethnic minorities in various provinces. In XUAR, Mandarin Chinese replaced Uyghurs as an official language in educational curriculum. Additionally, Uyghurs are banned from wearing headscarves, growing beards, fasting during Ramadan etc. Under the Xinjiang Management Plan, Han Chinese were offered tax free housing facilities along with high paying employment opportunities and facilities. In spite of China's continued oppression of ethnic minorities, many Muslim countries most notably Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Central Asian States denied their support to the Uyghurs (DNA India 2020). World Uyghur Congress, East Turkistan National Awakening Movement and the East Turkestan Government in-exile supporters are tortured in daily basis to stop them from reporting about the horrific reality about the Uyghurs.

Culture, ethnicity, and nation: The Uyghurs between Assimilation and Resistance

The Uyghur problem can also be examined through the prism of nationalism narratives. The issue of nation building and nationalism associated with this region has an implication and to be dealt with academically to demonstrate that why most of the Uyghurs have started resistance against the Chinese mainland narrative of nationalism and national identity. The origin of Uyghur nationalism or Turk nationalism can be traced back to the Manchu conquest of East Turkistan in 1759. During that time prominent Uyghur intellectuals such as Shair Akhun, Khislat Kashgari, Turdy Garibi wrote extensively against the Manchu oppression. These Social movements led to the development of Uyghur ideology. End of Chinese colonial rule and establishment of an independent country of East Turkestan were the key agendas of Uyghur nationalist ideology (Bhattacharya 2003).

Beijing perceives the Uyghurs as an ethno-nationalist threat to the Chinese nation (Human Rights Watch 2018). Revival of nationalism from 1990 onwards increases fresh demands for right to self-rule globally. So the issue like Uyghur movement that was neglected for a long time is now transcending beyond the national boundary by attracting international audiences as well.

The Uyghurs are not supposed to be included in the imagined nation of the dominant Han community unless and until giving up their 'deviant' traits, at the same time, the Uyghurs are not qualified to imagine to be a separate nation on the eyes of China. Though the Uyghurs perceive themselves to be a nation in all respects, in terms of their own homeland, culture, history, and language. The Uyghurs are not confirmed as a respected part of Chinese nation until they assimilate within the dominant Han culture. The process of assimilation always encourages the minority to give up their own culture and accept the majoritarian culture in order to be a part of a whole. The Uyghurs follow Islam not merely as their religion by names, but they try to lead their lives fully guided by their holy text, as like the other Muslims of the rest of the world. Since Islam is very much a bibliographic religion guided by a single holy text, the allegiance of the Uyghurs has always been to the land and culture of Islam that often generates China's dissatisfaction over the Uyghurs. Despite various attempts taken, like economic development, security operations, and educational development for the XUAR in the last twenty years; since 1990s the relation between the Uyghurs and the dominant Han have reached to the nadir because the CPC always assumes the Uyghur's cultural and religious practices to be a security threats to the Chinese national identity (Meyer 2016).

Uyghurs' Islamic culture and practices and their separate nationalistic idea that had grown during 1990s after disintegration of USSR and creation of several state-nation, are into existential threats after CPC's securitization campaign in XUAR from 1990 to 2010 that labeled XUAR as a land of extremism and terrorism (Meyer 2016). Beijing started their ethnic integration with a liberal view in 1970s and 1980s by extending religious rights to the minorities by allowing them to build mosques, publish religious books, run religious schools, etc. This strategy has failed due to revival of religious ethno-nationalism of the Uyghurs that challenged the Chinese national identity promoted by the CPC. It is the growing religious ethno-nationalism by the Uyghurs that led to take integrationist or assimilative nation-building approach on the Chinese part. Integrationist approach ran simultaneously with isolationist approach (Meyer, 2016). While the immigration and establishment of the Hans in XUAR falls under the integrationist or assimilative approach, then isolating the Uyghurs from their religious and cultural heritage falls under the isolationist strategy.

Creating a homogeneous nation in a multicultural society may be carried out either by eliminating the 'other' or to eliminate 'otherness' of the 'others'. The former promotes the propensity of ethnic cleansing, while the latter leaves a

chance of assimilation. Here two theoretical positions may be interesting – anthropoemic, means vomiting the others, and anthropophagic or digesting the others by assimilating them.[3] Assimilation always indulges in the mere chance to give up the 'deviant' traits of the others in order to assimilate with the dominant. While anthropoemic strategy generates ethnic cleansing by eliminating the other, the anthropophagic produces assimilation eliminating the 'otherness' of the 'others'. Chinese position in terms of Uyghur question is clear that their ultimate target is assimilation with the anthropophagic strategy. But until the anthropophagic strategy not been realized, they will follow the anthropoemic strategy. The Chinese formulation of the three years 'ideological de-extremization campaign' started in 2014 for the Uyghurs falls under their anthropophagic strategy.

This 'ideological de-extremization campaign' has been sought for weakening the distinct ethic, religious and cultural identity of the Uyghurs that is seen as an ideological virus thus a serious threat to create a unified Chinese nation (Human Rights Watch 2018). This strategy has also been sought for the Sinicization of the Uyghurs and their long cherished wish to bring the Uyghurs under the control of CPC leaderships. Recently Hardy (2020) writes how CPC has long been trying to wipe out the signs of the Muslim ethnic minority group's identity in Xinjiang and trying to make everything 'Chinese' in XUAR in terms of language, culture, attires, etc. to counter 'the "virus" of Islamic radicalism'. Even in XUAR the Chinese government has been making infrastructures, such as high speed trains, highways, as a part of Belt and Road Initiative, what apparently looks for the development of Uyghurs, but it has been taken to encourage the Han people to easily move and settle in XUAR from other Chinese region. The more Han people will settle in XUAR, the more Sinicization would prevail. Even in China proper the Uyghur migrant workers are used to face racial atrocities by the Hans and it leads to the gradual Uyghurs disappearance in China proper (Rayila 2011).

China's attempts to make a nation with achieving '*minzu* solidarity'[4] has been confronting the 'everyday resistance' of the Uyghurs (Bovingdon 2010:5, 15, 81-104). Chinese claims over the culturally plural Chinese nation which has been thwarted by the Uyghurs' resistance. The concept of cultural pluralism is a mirage in China since the assimilation process taken by the CPC rests on the dominant Han culture on the one hand, and curtails the cultural autonomy of the minority groups on the other. This is clearly an anthropophagic strategy to make a Chinese nation by eliminating the 'otherness' of the Uyghurs. Even though for more than eighty years, Chinese leaders claim that the Uyghurs living in Xinjiang are an unbreakable part of the Chinese nation, but many Uyghurs disagree and

are showing their resistance against this assimilative nation-building process. While Uyghur intellectuals want to build a collective identity taking up all Uyghurs, the ordinary Uyghurs have contributed in creating the nation through individual resistance (Bovingdon 2010: 6). CPC's initiative to re-write the Quran to reflecting socialist values (Fahey 2019), constraints in observing fast during Ramadan, etc. can be seen as a latent Islamophobia especially after the 9/11. Chinese government has continuously been trying to make Islam 'compatible with socialism' by making new laws from re-writing the Quran to ban of Islamic education of the Uyghur children (Al Zazeera 2019). This is definitely one type of 'socialist realism' once had been cherished by USSR.[5]

Internal Colonialism: A Tactic for Achieving Homogeneity

The current relationship between Uyghurs and the Chinese state is like Metropole and colony. Beijing exploited XUAR and Uyghurs for the primary goods such as cotton, wool, oil and minerals etc. for both domestic and international trade. And the significant part of the trade revenues is utilized for the development of dominant Han while the minority areas are subsidized by the center. In this context the phrase 'internal colonialism' helps us to understand the relationship between the Uyghurs and the Chinese state. In ethnic studies, the term internal colonialism delineates a condition of domination or subservience of one dominant ethnic group over another (Yang 2000: 90). The philosophy of internal colonialism looks at how a dominant ethnic group produces its own forms of ethnic supremacy within a given society. Different racial and ethnic groups are subjugated by the forms of oppression imposed on them by a dominant group in society. Internal colonialism perspective provides new insights to realize the positions and opportunities available to ethnic minority groups in multi-ethnic heterogeneous societies. Internal colonialism in general focuses on the exploitative relation between the state and ethnic groups. It attempts to uncover the exploitative and controlling tactics employed by the dominant group to manage the inter-ethnic agreements that involves both the dominant and the dominated groups. Though, mostly, the notion of class relation is vital in internal colonialism to highlight the contradictions between labour and capital. But in ethnic studies we employ this perspective to understand the political, economic and cultural actions of the dominant group to subjugate and force ethnic minorities to conform to the ideas of the dominant group. In view of the fact that these dominated groups are subject to be "colonized" by a contiguous power. In this case, internal colonialism refers to a situation where the core, for example the Chinese state and dominant Han group, exploits the

periphery, for example the Uyghurs, both politically, culturally and economically. In most of cases, when exploitations and inequalities begin to intensify, these peripheral areas start to resist against the dominant narratives and demands for nationhood increase gradually. In these exploitative relations the dominant group enjoys higher social status while the exploited groups are forced to embrace the dominant culture. Through the lens of this perspective we can argue that the Uyghurs, in spite of their rich contributions in Chinese and Central Asian histories, their position in Chinese society remains peripheral. Even though Uyghurs are one of oldest indigenous peoples of Central Asia, they have been brutally oppressed, persecuted and subordinated in modern times. In an attempt to alter demographic profile in XUAR, Chinese leadership are encouraging and often promising lucrative offers to Han people to settle down in XUAR. Uyghurs are against this immigration of Han people. Because of Uyghurs' lack of political unity, China can control Uyghurs ancestral land. Today Uyghurs are politically, economically and culturally remains the most deprived and marginalized in all over the China. Politically, Uyghurs enjoys less rights and avenues in comparison to an ordinary Han citizen. Political decision making is concentrated in the centrally appointed party structure and Uyghurs are granted limited political power. Even though Uyghurs are stakeholders of government decision making process, both Central Committee of the Communist Party and State Councils virtually act independent of national minorities. In addition, legislations as well as government regulations are highly discriminatory in nature to undermine Uyghurs minority status. In order to criminalize Uyghurs culture and identity, over the years' laws are manipulated in such a way that results in extreme marginalization of Uyghurs in their own land. Chinese authorities are on a daily basis conducting crackdowns to illegally detain the Uyghurs and send them to detention camps where they are tortured and subjected to rigorous punishments. In most cases Chinese leadership detained the Uyghurs in extra judicial manner and labeled them as extremists. But in reality most of the people in these camps are never charged with crimes and they lack proper legal mechanisms to defend them. In an attempt to dislodge the Uyghurs from their basic political rights and weaken their movements, the Uyghur activists are put into house arrests or sent to detention camps. In 2018 Chinese Government detained the sister and aunt of Rushan Abbas, a noted Uyghur activist for her public activism against the Chinese government. Over the last three years alone, Xi Jinping's administration put thousands of Uyghurs activists into detention camps and prisons for their movements against the Chinese repressive policies and actions (DNA India 2020).

Chinese leaderships in order to achieve *minzu* solidarity are purposively targeting ethnic minorities. As a result, the Uyghurs as an ethnic minority suffer from cultural genocide. The Uyghurs are forced to give up their religious beliefs and embrace Han based culture. They are put under strict state sponsored surveillance. Their daily activities are monitored and there is almost no freedom of expression and religious beliefs are available to them. Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) reports highlight that since 2017, 65% of the region's mosques and 58% of its important Islamic sites—including shrines and cemeteries have been either destroyed or damaged (Ruser et al. 2020). So it is very clear that the majority Han group exploits, colonizes and dominates the Uyghurs politically, socially and culturally. Today the Uyghurs are treated like enemies of the state and forcefully incarnated in detention camp without trial for the crime of being an ethnic minority in a majority dominated society. It is in fact that the Uyghur's ethnic distinctiveness and their subdued political and economic position in fact led to their struggle for political and economic emancipation. On the other hand, this peripheral position of the Uyghurs has been one of the causes of their gradual Islamization.

Conclusion

This study tries to understand whether the notion of Chinese nation stands against the idea of an inclusive one. The findings reveal that any ethnic minority group in China be it Mongols, Tibetans or Uyghurs who are resisting against the dominant Chinese nationalism narrative, are facing repercussions by the Chinese leaderships. Beijing in an attempt to incorporate XUAR into the dominant framework of Chinese nation is pursuing policies that aim to discern the Uyghurs from their identities and cultural roots. The question of the Uyghurs both in scholarly works and Chinese policies was neglected till 1990s. But with the emergence of global terrorism and subsequently 9/11 attack the issue of Uyghur has been internationalized. China has started to assert and draw links between the Uyghur nationalists and global jihadi outfits such as Taliban, Al Qaeda, etc. But whether there is really a connection between Uyghur movements and radical forces, it prompts a new debate. Though it becomes apparent today that various radical groups operate within Central Asian region tries to politicize the Uyghur issue by making alignment with the Uyghurs.

In addition, this study attempts to understand the ulterior motive of Chinese policies and actions in the Xinjiang region. Does Chinese policies focus on 'order and stability' by curbing extremist and radical Islamic forces in the region or this narrative is politically engineered? A closer retrospection of the Uyghurs

movement narrates a very different story. Beijing with the intention of facilitating Uyghurs within the dominant Han centric Chinese nation implemented assimilation tactics by isolating them from their cultural heritage and Islamic practices. Chinese leadership also believes that economic prosperity and modernization will ultimately manage the loyalty of such deviant minority groups. Nonetheless, Chinese assimilation tactics are proven inadequate as the Chinese nation is denied by the Uyghurs. As a result, Chinese policies became stringent, Uyghur's religious and personal freedoms are curtailed on daily basis. The large scale influx of the Han in the region not only limits the Uyghur's rights in the region but is seriously affecting their standard of life. The Uyghurs are suffering from extreme poverty and lack of employment, the economic growth in the region remains marginal. Nonetheless the dream of a strong nation remains far from reality. Subjugation and unlawful conviction cannot be a solution for soothing any separatist movement. It becomes quite clear that Chinese leadership is unable to maintain peace that government desires. As the issue of Uyghurs becomes increasingly sensitive around the world, the real question is whether the Chinese leadership has the political will to engage in talks with this minority group.

The role of the state is pivotal to understand the nuances of ethnicity based movements in multi-ethnic societies. State plays an important role in terms of categorizing ethnic groups and reifying ethnic loyalties so it may appear as concrete social realities (Grose 2019). State have to be very sensitive in terms of handling the demands of the ethnic groups. If they are mismanaged by the state, ethnic identities may lead to political turmoil. Now the question arises how the Chinese state attempts to visualize a strong homogenous Chinese nation amidst diverse ethnic identities and interests in the society. In the case of Uyghurs, it can be argued that the Chinese state exploits the Uyghurs through its ideology supplemented by state-led violence to make them subjugated and subservient to the dominant ideology, i.e., ideology of the dominant Han majority.

End Notes:

[1]*Minzu* refers to the ethnic minority groups in China.

[2] According to Uyghur Human Rights Project Report Han Chinese occupy more than 60 percentage of senior political posts, while Uyghurs hold only 20 percentages. At the county level, Uyghurs hold 24 percentages of Party Secretary and Mayor posts. Hans occupy 51 percentages, and other ethnicities 15 percentage. Under representation of Uyghurs are most visible in military and party which are the epicenter of power in XUAR. For details, see (Uyghur Human Rights Project 2017).

[3] For details of anthropoemic and anthropophagic strategies of Claude Levi-Strauss, see (Bauman 2000: 101).

[4]*Minzu* solidarity denotes the solidarity between the Han and the ethnic minorities. For details, see (Bovingdon 2010).

[5] In erstwhile USSR, until 1991, literary works were fully arrested by the state. All literature and writings were to be favour of the communist party. There were four key elements which are called socialist realism. First, *Ideinost* – the work must be in favour of state's socialist and communist ideology. Second, *Klassovost* – the work must be related to the class consciousness. Third, *Partynost* – the work must be in accordance with the ideology of proletariat party. Fourth, *Narodnost* – the work must represent the interests of the people (*narod*). See (Ruder 2020).

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