

CPEC: Punjab Lags Behind

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The province of the Punjab occupies the central position in the economic geography of Pakistan. The total area of the Punjab is around 205,344 square km or 26 percent land area of Pakistan and with a population exceeding 82 million, approximately 56% of the country's total population. The Punjab has the highest Gross Domestic Product (GDP) i.e., 57 per cent in the economy of Pakistan or US\$ 104 billion by 2011, which is steadily growing. The literacy rate of the Punjab is 60 percent at present. There are six districts in the Punjab that have above 70 percent literacy rate, making a difference to overall 55 percent literacy of the country.

The province connects well with all three provinces in addition to Azad Kashmir, the strategic strong-hold of the Federation of Pakistan.

However, the tremors of the Kalabagh Dam as heard in the 1980s have been repeated once again. In mega-national project Punjab has been ignored once again.

The question arises that why the political parties from Punjab have not been raising their voices and concerns in order to have an equitable share of the CPEC route alignment plan? This is criminal negligence as all federating units should have an equitable and just distribution of economic resources. Benefits should be passed on to all provinces based upon their size, population, and level of development.

The Western Route of the road alignment leading to Kashgar from Gwadar Port, as inaugurated on 31 December, largely ignored Punjab and wiped out completely Sindh. Only three districts of the Punjab, Bukkhar, Mianwali (the home town of PTI Chairman Imran Khan) and Attock, were included in the alignment. This was just natural that these three districts of Punjab were included in the Western alignment as they could not be deliberately neglected.

The former connects D. I. Khan with Bhakkar and the latter connects with Haripur. Bhakkar cannot be excluded in the Western Route alignment. The rest 33 districts of the Punjab have been ignored rather being punished under the anti-Punjab wave and the centre-province rift. The district of D.G. Khan and Layyah could easily form the part of the Western Route alignment but they were not included based upon grievances of smaller provinces against the Punjab. Grievances of south Punjab should be addressed in the route alignment.

The combined share of three districts of the Punjab, i.e., Bhakkar, Mianwali, and Attack will be 433 km or 14 percent share of the total 3000 Western Route alignment, where as its geographical size in the area of Pakistan is around 26 percent. Population and human resources of 82 million people also cannot be ignored as labour, technicians, professionals, businessmen offer golden opportunities to make the CPEC a success. The Eastern and Central Route, in fact, have the capacity to compensate the Punjab.

Why has the Punjab not been asking for its due and legitimate share in roads, railways, and industrial projects to be launched under the mega-national China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)? Why this deliberate silence on the part of the Punjabi politicians?

The case of the Muslim League-Q is the most controversial. It was central for staging a sit-in in Islamabad in August 2014 when Chinese President Xi Jinping cancelled his visit to Islamabad, which delayed the initiation of the CPEC until April next year. The Punjab-based the Pakistan Awami Tehreek (PAT) was in strong collaboration with the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI).

In all Eastern, Western, and Central Routes, Punjab does not get the lion's share. It is Balochistan that could get up to 43 percent share, which is justifiable and natural as the province is 43 percent of the total land area of Pakistan. This also reflects in the CPEC route alignment.

In case of any developmental and industrial project, Punjab possesses best possibilities and opportunities and it could play the central role in the construction of all mega-projects under the CPEC.

The Punjab is not an exploiter of the CPEC. Rather it is a victim itself by depriving it from the benefits of this mega-project. An equitable share of the CPEC to the Punjab would further enhance its GDP contribution to the overall economy of Pakistan.

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