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**VCH Eswari Vemulapalli**  
Doctoral Candidate, Centre for  
Inner Asian Studies, School of  
International Relations,  
Jawaharlal Nehru University,  
New Delhi, India

## **Ethnicity and nationalism in China: Making of Uyghur identity**

**VCH Eswari Vemulapalli**

### **Abstract**

Nation is a political construct. All social groups, communities, ethnicities, classes are not represented equally in the nation-state. Nation-states often masquerade these differences in the name of national identity. In process of establishing a national identity for China, there were conflicts involved between different ethnic groups, as not all nationalities were equally represented. This eventually led to increase in movements for separate nations and greater autonomy by different ethnic groups. China after becoming Republic in 1949, had strived hard to project itself as a multiethnic state. However in practice not only the principles of pluralism were compromised, there was also an attempt to impose uniform standards on people of ethnic communities. The policies of the government like identifying different nationalities and majoritarian impulse has furthered increased the divide between different ethnicities. Uyghurs are one of the recognized minority nationalities, who found that Chinese policies were indeed majoritarian and exclusionary. Chinese policies also undermined Uyghur cultural and political autonomy. This gave rise to a range of political activities in Xinjiang. This paper engages with the rise of Uyghur identity in Xinjiang and tries to engage with political manifestations of the rise of Uyghur identity.

**Keywords:** Nation, Chinese nationalism, Ethnicity, Uyghur, identity, Han, Minority Nationality

### **Introduction**

#### **Nationalism and Ethno-Regional Identities in China**

Rustow (1967) <sup>[9]</sup> gives a comprehensive account of the formation of modern state. Nations are created through the transformation of an ethnic group into self-conscious political entity, and then the nation witnesses the formation of inter-ethnic groups and tries to have a composite homogenous national culture which finally establishes modern state. As Guibernau (2005) [quoted in Andrews and Saward ed. 2005] <sup>[3]</sup> comments, 'in seeking to engender a sense of belonging among its citizens the nation- state demands their loyalty and fosters their national identity. Guibernau defines nation as 'a human group conscious of forming a community, sharing a common culture, attached to a clearly demarcated territory, having a common past and a common project for the future and claiming the right to rule itself'.

The first census of the People's Republic, conducted in 1953, registered only 41 nationalities. After the minority nationality identification campaigns in the late 1950s, the 1964 census registered 53 nationalities, with the 1982 census reporting a total of 56 nationalities in China. The transformation and ethno genesis of these peoples into recognized nationalities is crucial to our understanding of ethnic nationalism in China' (Gladney: 1996) <sup>[1]</sup>.

According to Safran (1998) <sup>[4]</sup>, many of the scholars on Chinese ethnicity, described Chinese polity as multi-ethnic, the idea of singular ethnicity and nationality could not be established in spite of rigorous socialist campaigns, the variations among different ethnicities and policies of the government are not narrowed down. The establishment of PRC is on the basis of Marxist- Leninist principles, but reintroduction of Confucian ideology, there is actually balancing act between the two. The inter- ethnic relations are not only affected by the political decision but also economic and social policies like marketization, promoting ethnic tourism etc. language also plays an important role with ethnic language dominated by the official language i.e. is Mandarin. With this there is sharp increase in the rise of ethnic tensions and separatism in a way giving space for developing 'local nationalisms'.

### **Correspondence**

**VCH Eswari Vemulapalli**  
Doctoral Candidate, Centre for  
Inner Asian Studies, School of  
International Relations,  
Jawaharlal Nehru University,  
New Delhi, India

According to Brass (1991)<sup>[5]</sup>, “ethnic nationalism and state-centered nationalism may be seen, as subtypes of a more general process of identity formation defined as the process of intensifying the subjective meanings of a multiplicity of symbols and of striving to achieve multi-symbol congruence among a group of people defined initially by one or more central symbols, whether those symbols are ethnic attributes or loyalty to a particular state. The processes of both ‘nationality formation’ and state building may be pushed beyond pluralist accommodations to extreme, to expulsions, counter- expulsions, the exchange of population groups and even to genocide.” Nationality is developed from ethnic movement for formation of groups or community to articulation and fighting for civil, political, economic and cultural rights for its members.

### **Religion as a factor in making of Uyghur Identity**

Ethnic identities will crystallise when they are facing oppositions. In ‘From Empire to Nation’, Rupert Emerson defines nation as the largest community which when breaks down, it commands loyalty of its members. To face the state apparatus ethnic groups organise themselves into strong organisations.

‘Violence among Muslim communities in China continues to be intra- fractional and intra- ethnic, rather than along Muslim/ non- Muslim religious lines. The government has sought to approach these conflicts more carefully, involving local Muslim leaders in adjudicating disputes, but when these leaders do not arrive at rapid solutions, the result is often heavy- handed state intervention. It is noteworthy that there is at least an attempt to resolve disputes before cracking down on them, which indicates increased sensitivity to local Muslim issues’ (Gladney: 1996)<sup>[1]</sup>.

There is rise in ethnic nationalism along with the challenge posed to the state by minorities. There is violence in form of freedom of expression by Chinese press towards practitioners of Islam. There is mockery of rituals and religious symbols of Muslims. This has led to rise of voice of Muslims especially youth against Chinese state. These incidents can be related with the argument of Benedict Anderson that the multiplicity of print media in Europe gave utmost importance to national and transnational identities, reaching out to isolated groups and individuals. What is the important issue to be noticed here is the relating of the blasphemous articles with Salman Rushdie’s ‘Satanic Verses’ and with this they have grabbed international attention.

### **Rise of Uyghur Nationalism**

Karl Deutsh (1966)<sup>[11]</sup> in his theory of social communications, whose central argument was that the existence of a socially mobilised population within a distinctive ethnic group was a precondition for the development of nationalism among its members. Like in western democracies, an ethnic group will seek civil rights then education system which represent its own language and culture slowly a say in regional politics, demand with sovereignty but contended with autonomy. Finally, aspirations for separate nationality and nationhood will increase. This is akin to Akzin’s argument in ‘state and nation’. To quote Margaret Moore, 1997 [quoted in Andrews and Saward ed. 2005]<sup>[3]</sup>, ‘the term nation refers to a group of people who identify themselves as belonging to a particular nation group, who are usually ensconced on a

particular historical territory, and who have a sense of affinity to people sharing that territory. It is not necessary to specify which traits define a group seeking self-determination.’ Studies on nationalism have shown that nations are constructed commonalities or to quote Anderson (1983)<sup>[7]</sup>, nation can be conceived as an imagined political community... It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. The construction of ethnic identity of modern Uyghur community is initiated in Russian Central Asia. In early 1920’s when Russian Central Asia was delimited and demarcated, Soviet Union had recognised Uyghurs and East Turkestan as separate national identity and nation. During this period, the Central Asian Republics were demarcated and are represented by the present day frontiers. Meanwhile, the Soviet government under the Bolsheviks have accepted the name ‘Uyghur’ and identified the sedentary people of East Turkestan or Chinese Turkestan as ‘Uyghur’.

E.J. Hobsbawm (2012)<sup>[6]</sup> beautifully embodies different phases of nationalist movement. Firstly it is a phase dominated by cultural expressions rather than political, secondly, it is an extremist phase with propaganda for a separate nation or sovereignty and thirdly, mass mobilization through various media. The growth of Uyghur nationalism in China occurred on the one hand, as part of a general process of nation building and shaping of national consciousness in Central Asia, and on the other hand, as a response to growing Chinese nationalism.

There is rise in spirit of nationalism in response to the exploitation of Uyghur community who claims they are historically the genuine inhabitants of Xinjiang by a majority group i.e. Han community who claims they have control over these lands for centuries. Nationalism can also increase with the growth of elite and for their political sustenance they will bring differences among ethnic groups basing on symbols like language, religion; it may be even economic differences. For an ethnic nationalist conflict to develop into an big movement it just needs ethnic stratification due to rural- urban disparities, regional imbalances and economic and resource exploitation. So for this movement to be successful the political elite of the specific community must be able to meet the demands and aspirations of people from different strata. So for sustaining the nationalist movement, political organisations with skilful leadership is necessary.

‘The melting pot has erupted into a “cauldron” of ethnicities. In China, the Soviet Union, and around the globe, ethnic and national movements have risen to the forefront of social and political action. Though both modernization and Marxist theories of nationalism predicted the demise of national identities, the recent assertion of these identities in the political arena has cast doubt on, if not repudiated, these assimilationist assumptions. Russification, though accepted by many as an inexorable inevitability, has not occurred among the many strident nationalities of Soviet Union. Sinicization, predicted as well for the minorities of China, is called into question in the face of rising nationalism and the persistence of ethnic identities’ (Gladney: 1996)<sup>[1]</sup>. There is escalation of violence because of secession movements. ‘ great tensions do exist in Han minority relations, but these derive from a host of specific minority grievances and from Han chauvinism and the

resulting rejection by some minority people of the state's super nationalist concept of a 'Chinese nation'(Sautman: 1998)<sup>[8]</sup>.

### **Response of Uyghurs**

'The fact of an independence movement in Xinjiang based on Islam does not mean that the Islamic peoples of Xinjiang get on well together. There is, for instance, a long-standing and still surviving antagonism between the Hui of Xinjiang and the Uyghurs. In the 1930s and 1940s, there was a series of secessionist wars against the Han rule of Sheng Shicai in Xinjiang; all of them were defeated and resulting in enormous bloodshed as well as antagonism between the Han and the Uyghurs. The role of the Hui in these wars were very ambivalent and unpredictable, especially that of the leader Ma Zhongying. Early in 1934 Ma's troops played a decisive role in suppressing a secessionist rebellion based on Kashgar" (Mackerras: 1998)<sup>[2]</sup>.

Due to increasing cross- border ties with Central Asian Republics (CARs) and more openness regarding fundamentalism and separatism has brought the Uyghurs into lime light. Formation of organisations which are associated with indigenous and external influences and associations had helped Uyghurs to demand for their rights. Through their Diaspora they are trying to make the international community listen to their nuances. They have become aware of their Islamic brotherhood. Thus this spread of Uyghur Diaspora had helped Uyghurs to increase their demands for separate nation. Uyghurs who are practitioners of Sufism and speak language of Turkic have been demanding for long separation from Chinese domination. It's not appropriate at this juncture for the Chinese to malign the separatist movement of Uyghurs by linking them with terrorist outfits. China has to understand that Uyghurs are pursuing their cause for separate nation by keeping in view the newly formed states of Central Asia but not the terror organisations.

### **Chinese Response to Uyghur Separatism**

China has enormous will to deal the Uyghur issue because of its nature of separatist movement. The important forces behind the raise of concerns towards this separatism are reluctant CCP to lose its power, Chinese demand for stability and law and order, and state's pursuit of secure frontiers. The separatism in Xinjiang is having roots in societal structures and historical conditions. China is being criticized for its excesses over the Uyghurs which include human rights violations, illegal detentions and persecutions. It is faced with stiff opposition on the home turf and from diaspora on these issues. Till early 1990s, Chinese never opened up the regarding Uyghur issue. They followed a policy of viewing it as internal conflict. But after that they have internationalised the issue by linking with Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism. They are able to garner support for this Uyghur issue. Firstly, china has rejected anyone's interference in the Uyghur issue by saying that its their internal problem and nobody can interfere in that. It has accused that there is external influence in creation of these problems. After the Sino- Soviet split the Chinese government thought that the rise of Uyghur nationalism and separatism is due to influence of and through the help extended by Soviets. The Chinese accused Russia of disintegrating China. Later, with the formation of independent Central Asian Republics, Chinese thought that

there is influx of fundamentalists and terror elements from those porous boundaries. It alleged that the separatists of Uyghur community are having links with external terror elements. 'The Chinese government invariably argues that active supporters of independence constitute a small minority, but it certainly acknowledges that they exist. That the focus of blame is Islam, especially when supported by foreign influences, mainly those of the United States and groups within the Islamic Central Asian States' (Mackerras: 1998)<sup>[2]</sup>.

China has thought that porous frontiers are harmful for its territorial considerations so it sought to have good relations with all neighbours. With the Central Asian countries whom it considers as important partners in combating separatism due to their geographical and demographical proximity to Xinjiang. In order to have good relations, Shanghai Five was started which was later enlarged to become Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). It includes almost all frontier nations as members and some with observatory status. SCO which started as an organisation for economic relations as main motive, finally ended up with emphasis on security issues. It has condemned the interference of other countries in Kosovo crisis in the name of human rights violations as interference in domestic affairs of a nation.

China has crushed the Uyghur separatists, it has persecuted many Uyghurs and it is successful in making United States of America to add some of the political organisations of Uyghurs on the list of terrorist organisations. It has arrested and given death penalty for Uyghur leader Rebaiya Kadeer. But somehow it was changed and she leads the Uyghur community from exile. China has set up high vigilance throughout Xinjiang province with the help of increasing infrastructural facilities like transportation and communication. Although the constitution of China guarantees religious freedom to individuals, it has laid huge restrictions on Uyghurs because of which opposition is strengthening day by day. It had improved relations with its all weather ally Pakistan and it had started developing infrastructure through Karakoram passes. China is able to manage friendly relations with European Union too in spite of presence of largest number of Uyghur diaspora. China is successful in getting g Uyghurs extradited from any of the said countries. China has good relations with United States of America too.

### **International responses to the Uyghur issue**

After the formation of Central Asian Republics, there prevailed situations of civil war due to mercurial rise of revival of Islam and fundamentalism which has alarmed China. Then China has started forging ties with other nations and has tried to isolate Uyghurs on the issue of their separate Turkestan. International community has started responding in different ways. In the following paragraphs we can have a glimpse of responses from some of the countries where Uyghur diaspora is there and where china has good relations. 'Escalating Uyghur activism, whether it be for increased independence, or more often, objections over environmental issues or nuclear testing in Xinjiang, receive swift domestic response and widespread international attention' (Gladney: 1996)<sup>[1]</sup>.

Turkey which is having huge number of Uyghur population outside China always had instability in relations with China. Turkey had officially started its relations with China in 1971. The strained relations with China were once again

revived during 1990's. Turkey is sensitive towards Uyghurs problem. It has criticised china for its highhandedness over the protesters. The important motives behind Turkey's move is its public's anger over Chinese and secondly to be in the question regarding Uyghurs. Starting with 1997, Turkey has brought changes in its policy towards China. It has done this keeping in view the growing stature of china in international politics and its expanding economy. Through good relations with China it got many benefits. In contrary to this situation it has imposed restrictions on the Uyghur community and even on their freedom of expression. The free display of their nationalist aspirations and symbols are restricted by Turkish authorities. There were incidents of arrests of Uyghur dissidents and suppression of Uyghur movement in Turkey.

European Union which is strategic partner of China is very careful in its approach towards the issue of Uyghurs. It is a community of different nation- states which came together to maintain stability and order in European continent. EU is careful in observing the question of Uyghur separatism as Xinjiang is located in the strategic Eurasian landmass and it can be related with the situations of post Soviet Union. It is dealing this sensitive issue with care and here it is keeping in view other separatist movements in Europe like that of Georgia, South Ossetia etc. it is unable to pressurise the Chinese government on its excesses committed on the Uyghurs due to the growing economic prowess of China. Meanwhile the sufferers are the Uyghurs who are even denied asylum by these governments.

The Central Asian states are main partners of China in controlling the Uyghurs issue of separatism. The whole region of Central Asia along with Xinjiang region is earlier geographically addressed as 'Turkestan'. The Central Asian region excluding Xinjiang is known as Russian Turkestan and the part under china is known as Chinese Turkestan. After the collapse of Soviet Union and formation of CARs, the aspirations of Uyghurs have increased paramount. When China sensed that there is danger lurking across border, it made instant moves to tackle this problem. It has formed alliances and gave importance to its neighbours for centuries by establishing strategic ties. CARs are sympathetic towards Uyghurs and they are allowing their soil for Uyghur's expression of nationalism and they have supported the political organisations of Uyghurs. But they became allies with China in fight against terrorism, fundamentalism and separatism. They have been subjected to pressure from China through regional organisations. China has entered into many deportation treaties with these countries. In spite of these activities of governments of Central Asian countries, peoples of this region are sympathetic towards Uyghurs. They believe that it is very difficult for the Uyghurs to get independence from the Chinese because of huge presence of Han Chinese and their imposition of Han culture. The quick developmental process followed in this region by Chinese shows that they will never allow Uyghurs to disintegrate from China. Many of the Central Asian people are critical of the Chinese government for its oppressive measures and marginalisation of Uyghurs. The imposition of assimilationist policies on Uyghurs by Chinese is seen with dislike by these people. They are against the growth of Han Chinese at the expense of Uyghurs. Central Asian scholars argues that the oppression of Chinese towards Uyghurs by restricting their freedom of religion and citing their religion as cause of separatism and terror activities makes Uyghur

separatists believe that religion is an important instrument in attaining freedom. In spite of all these different concerns regarding Uyghurs, Central Asian people are doubtful about the territorial fragmentation and the consequences following that.

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