

FROM NOMADISM TO PREMATURE TRIBALISM: THE CASE FOR FATA

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Abstract

Originally marked by a slight convergence and sharp divergence nomadism and tribalism have often been taken into account as closest social phenomena as far as their application in the tribal areas is concerned. An in-depth academic investigation of the characteristics of both the phenomena can clarify that they are far away from each other with a distance of centuries. With a general recognition nomadic society always grows into tribal structure with a natural process of evolution which usually takes place after a long span of time. But the case of tribal areas is unique and unprecedented because here nomadism has been transformed into tribalism with a rapid move and push. Rapidity in this process has ultimately arises a question – premature tribalism. The paper, however, highlights the pros and cons of nomadism and clarifies that how the nomadic society of FATA has been artificially transformed into a tribal society with ulterior motives.

Key Words: Tribal areas (FATA), Nomadism, Tribalism, British Empire

Introduction

At the advent of British Empire in India the North West Frontier was geographically going through a process of transition, as it had lost direct contacts with the central authority of Mughul administration and gradually tended to become under the control of rising Afghan over lordship. Politically, there was total absence of central authority which had given space to the movement of lawless gangs of plunderers and extortionists who used to descend from the highlands through the passes towards the Indian plains.

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Thus the Mughul power was attacked from all sides, and big sections of the empire were either directly cut off or these *de facto* maintained an independent status. (Mukherjee, 1957: 250).

It sounds strange that at the advent of British Empire in India the natural nomadic society tended to become violent which had far-reaching socio-economic and political repercussions on India's politics and society. The rising powers of East India Company (EIC), the Sikhs and the Marhatas on the one hand and the gradual decline of Mughul Empire on the other hand created a situation which intensified constant struggle for ascendancy in India. The balance of power was disturbed and needed counter-balancing factors from outside India. These factors could have come either from the South East shores of India or from across North Western borderlands through the passes from Central Asia.

In the struggle for power the French opposed East India Company from the Indian shores and the hordes of organized nomadic clans from Central Asia under the leadership of Nadir Shah and Ahmad Shah Abdali opposed Marhatas and Sikhs. The incursion of India by Nadir Shah during 1738-39 not only uncovered the reality of inner frailness of the central administrative structure of Mughal Empire in India but also disrupted the central-provinces nexus which ultimately led to further dwindle the influence of Delhi over the rest of the Empire. High level of nepotism was so rampant that positions like governorships had come to be dispensed within the kinfolds, whose representatives, were often engaged in political brokering even with external powers for the sake of their individual avarices. For instance, the direct contacts and political deals of the Chiefs of Deccan and Bengal with the French and English on the one hand and the escort of the Chief of Multan, Shah Nawaz Khan, with Nadir Shah of Persia on the other hand eventually wrecked the central government. (Singh, 1977: 40).

Socially, the society was in a state of nomadic stage which was constantly in nomadic movement from Central Asia to India and vice versa. The nomadic clans had not yet evolved into organized tribal structures. Therefore, it could not be said that the

British colonial authorities found the society of the area in a state of tribalism. The nomadic clans did have tribal consciousness but the society was not yet organized on tribal lines and nomadism was the order of the day. Nomadic movements of population were always peaceful and had no undue influence on Indian social environment. It was always punctuated by climatic and economic factors as most of the nomadic clans had to seek grazing fields for their animals which were naturally regulated by climatic changes in Central Asia and India.

Nomadism as a Social Phenomenon

Nomadism refers to a diverse traditional way of life practised by people who do not live continually in the same place but move cyclically or periodically to ensure a source of food and livelihood. This nomadic move of people can be classified into three categories. The hunters and gatherers nomads who move at varying intervals in search of plants and game knowing the location of water holes, floras and the habits of game. The second is pastoral nomads who typically practice transhumance and mainly depend on domesticated livestock thus moving their cattle back and forth on a seasonal or periodic basis to find pasturage for their animals. They usually move to lowlands in winter and highlands in summer. The third category is called tinker or trade nomads who move regularly to trade or practise small crafts. (Britannica, 2005: 753). However, mobility is a common phenomenon among this classification. Koocheki and Gliessman wrote about the nomadic mobility in these words:

Nomadism based on human and animal mobility is an ecological response to harsh conditions of an arid environment. Through seasonal and cyclical movement of grazing animals over great distances, these systems are capable of optimizing the use of limited and traditionally available food of the more arid areas. Nomadism is not an aimless wandering in search of water and pasture, it is rather a regular pattern of movement that is closely tied to location of productive, though seasonally restricted, pasture. (Koocheki & Gliessman, 2005: 114).

By virtue of constant mobility nomadic people have no attachment with land, agriculture and farming. They eat only meat, marrow and milk products and walk extensively with their moveable dwellings. (Barfield, 1981: xv). Hence, they prefer cattle-raising such as sheep, goat, horse, donkey and camel. The sheep and goat are the major sources of meat, milk, wool and their further products while horse, camel and donkey are the principal means of transportation in a nomadic society. (Krader, 1955: 302-3). Herding is hence the prominent feature of pastoral and nomadic life regarding which the Krader states as:

Herding, too, involves a symbiosis. The livestock supply the food and the fuel (dung) of the herdsman, his clothing (wool, felts, hides and skins), his housing (tents of felts), means of transport, and his goods for trade. The herdsman, for his part, affords his herds protection against predatory beasts and men (who might slaughter rather than milk the stock); he digs wells, builds windbreaks against the winter blizzards, isolates (in some instances) the stock infected epizootics, and supplies obstetric intervention for the herds, including early post-natal care in feeding (primarily of lambs in finding the teats of the ewes through the wool). The herdsman and the herds are thus mutually dependent by which is meant symbiosis. (Krader, 1955: 302-3).

The Decline of Mughul Empire and the British Socio-Political Engineering

Although the North West frontier of India was safe and secure under the strong Mughul rulers but after the demise of Emperor Aurangzeb the frontier's security was debilitated particularly by virtue of in-house uproar and internal upheaval. Henceforth, the Mughul Empire could not resist the Nadir Shah's inroad into India and his forces ultimately pillaged the populace and devastated the Empire from outside India. The latter's assassination in June 1747 didn't release the Empire from further external intrusions. He was thus followed by his commander Ahmad Shah, an Afghan chief of Abdali clique who rapidly demonstrated his political strength and became an independent ruler of Afghanistan. (Mukherjee, 1957: 250-51). He was eyewitness of "the weakness of the Empire, the imbecility of the

Emperor, the inattentiveness of the ministers, the spirit of the independence which had crept among the grandees.” (Mukherjee, 1957: 251). After consolidating his power in Afghanistan, Abdali steered almost seven expeditions into India from 1748-1767 which gradually collapsed the Mughul Empire in India and ultimately paved the way for the British expansion towards the north-west of India. (Singh, 1977: 346). Consequently, the nomadic society which was in constant movement from highland to lowland and vice versa, became exposed to violence during the course of these incursions.

The first half of the 18th Century unveiled that Mughul power in India was on decline while the East India Company, being an external force was consolidating its position in India. In this context, the observation of Marx on India’s political scenario is noteworthy:

How came it that English supremacy was established in India? The paramount power of the Great Moghul was broken by the Moghul Viceroy. The power of the Viceroy was broken by the Mahrattas. The power of the Mahrattas was broken by the Afghans, and while all were struggling against all, the Briton rushed in and was enabled to subdue them all. A country not only divided between Mahommedan and Hindoo, but between tribe and tribe, between caste and caste; a society whose framework was based on a sort of equilibrium, resulting from a general repulsion and constitutional exclusiveness between all its members. (Marx, 1853: *New York Daily Tribune*, August 8).

The internal and external factors responsible for the devastation of Mughul rule in India were highly depicted in Marx’s writing as he was a keen observer of the overall socio-political and economic conditions of the sub-continent at that time. In the course of all these developments particularly the interior and exterior covetousness for supremacy on the one hand accelerated politico-administrative tussle within the local elites or stakeholders on state-level while on the other hand it exposed the society, which was basically nomadic in its nature and essence, to violence. It also generated a sense of attachment with

immoveable property in the mind of populace previously moving without such considerations from one place to another while keeping in view the favourable climatic and economic factors. Hence, this factor of violence unnaturally transformed the nomadic society from a peaceful existence to an existence of martialism. The transformation of nomadism into tribalism was thus unnatural and unreal. Later on, history unfolded the fact that this so-called tribalism closely associated with pseudo-martialism was nonentity and merely a colonial construct created for getting the desired goals and objectives.

Premature Tribalism: A Profound Policy of the British Empire

The Anglo-Russian rivalry preferred the formation of a buffer zone in Afghanistan aimed at evading direct collision of both the great powers i.e. Russia and Britain. The latter while strengthening its political mussels in India and protecting their empire from any exterior foray felt it essential to have a buffer to the buffer and thus created tribal areas. That was basically their frontier defence policy in which the tribal belt and its inhabitants played a crucial role. (Bangash, 2016: 220). About the significance of this imperial expediency A. S. Ahmad states:

If they (tribal areas) had not existed they would have to be created. There were not only mighty imperial states involved in the Great Game but also small obscure tribes living ... along the central mountain regions that divide South Asia from Central Asia, between Afghanistan and the South Asian subcontinent. (Bangash, 2016: 220).

It is empirically proved that whenever a body, scheme, structure or design is artificial in its nature and spirit then its basic components and major elements cannot be natural or real. Similarly, the structure of tribal society located on the Durand Line seems to be an unnatural construct and its manufacturing components primarily too. Besides empirical evidences, the historical source materials if observe critically and impartially then an authentic conclusion may be drawn easily. The independence, pride, honour and other such extra-ordinary

characteristics of the tribal society seem to be based on myth. As Lord Lansdowne claimed that ‘the tribes are, in truth not independent’. (Roberts, 1898: 348-49). It was expedient for almost all big powers in the East to have such a zone spreading outward from the actual frontier dubbed by Lansdowne as a ‘sphere of influence within which we shall not attempt to administer the country ourselves, but within which we shall not allow any aggression from without.’ (Bangash, 2016: 218). Besides it, the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) is like a hanging sword on the overall freedom and independence of the tribal people. (FCR, 1901: Section 21).

Literature produced during the colonial era particularly by the British writers regarding the Pakhtun character represents the latter as a brave, honest, trustworthy and loyal one. As Robert Warburton opines:

The germ of confidence once established amidst these people always bear fruit and increaseThe deadliest of enemies dropped their feuds for the time being while I was in camp. Property was always safe. (Lindholm, 1996: 3).

The British imperial masters started formal correspondence with the Pakhtun people from 1808 when they sent Mountstuart Elphinstone (Britannica, 2005: 463) to the court of the Afghan ruler Shah Shoja (Singh, 1977: 349) to know his well about the possibility of an alliance between Afghanistan and the British India against the perceived threat of Napoleon. (Britannica, 2005: 509). Since then the relationship of the British with the Pakhtuns was continuous until the former left India. The remarks of that first British officer who came into contact with the Pakhtuns, expresses regarding the character of the Pakhtuns in the following words:

They {Pakhtuns} are fond of liberty, faithful to their friends, kind to their dependents, hospitable, brave, frugal, laborious and prudent and they are less disposed than the nations in the their neighbourhood to falsehood, intrigue, and deceit. (Elphinstone, 1972: 331)

Elphinstone further states:

One of the most remarkable characteristics of the Afghans {Pakhtuns}, is their hospitality. The practice of this virtue is so much a point of honour, that their reproach to an inhospitable man, is that he has no *pooshtoonwullee*. (Elphinstone, 1972: 295).

Spain asserts that the translation of the Pashto word '*Pukhtunwali*' into English language is unanimously agreed as 'the way of the Pathans' and it obviously exists since long but the word has been used for the first time in British historiography during 1815. (Spain, 1995: 39).

Goodwin (Spain, 1995: 69), who stayed for a long period of time in the frontier, share his view by appraising the tribesmen's (Pakhtuns') character in the following words:

Our dealing with [Pushtuns] was a gentleman's game, ... No matter how poor a [Pushtuns] was, he may meet the King of England or the Viceroy of India, but he'd look him straight in the eye and shake hands with as if to say that I'm as good a man as you are. (Goodwin, 1969: 238).

Above all the colonial writers like Mundy (Talbot, 1953: 123) and Kipling (Kim, 1901: 85) popularized the romantic view of the courageous Pathan warrior in their respective works while latter on M.M. Kaye further fictionalized the character of the Pathan in his monumental work i.e. *The Far Pavilions*. (Schofield, 2010: 93). The colonial masters conceived the repute of the Pathan as a warrior caste and dubbed them with such emotive titles as 'our chaps, natural rulers, the equals of the British' in their respective literature. (Cullather, 2002: 517). Kipling in his short story "The Man Who Would Be King" clarifies the Pathan "You're white people, sons of Alexander, and not like common, black Mohammedans". (Kipling, 1901: 74).

By admiring the blustery warrior groups of the empire in their respective literature the British colonial writers constructed the image of martial race in order to absorb the dwellers of the frontier into their empire in such a way to attain two major

objectives i.e. to plan internal and external security. The British, hence, exploited the so-called martial race as a police force to keep vigilant watch on internal security by suppressing internal rebellions particularly in the north-west of the empire and prevent the perceived aggression of Russia. (Lindholm, 1996: 6-7).

An in-depth review of the literary history of Pashto unveils the reality that like other oriental languages the Pashto language and literature also flourished in the North-West Frontier of India during the British Raj. (Jan, 2010: 1). For administrative reasons, both civil and military colonial officials learned Pashto in order to easily communicate with the native people and acquire substantial know-how of them and their surrounding as well. In the preface of the *First Pakkhtoo Book* (Jan, 2010: 3), Gilbertson expresses:

He {a Pathan} is withal a proud man, prone to meet scorn with scorn, and ever ready to return blow for blow. That we cannot address him in his own language, and deal with him direct without the help of middlemen, he attributes to either of two reasons, incapacity to learn his language, or indifference to him, his people and his affairs.(Gilbertson, 1901: vii).

Well-versed in Pashto language, some of the British colonial officials and reputed dignitaries worked enormously on Pashto language, literature, phrases, proverbs, grammar and vocabulary. Robert Leech, who was a renowned oriental scholar, articulated the first scientific study of vocabulary in which he discussed Teerahi and the Deer dialects of Pashto that is spoken in the frontier regions of Dir and Teerah. However, his sudden demise in 1845, almost at the age of thirty-three years, did not let him to do more. (Leech, 1838: 7). Bellew an Indian-born British official who served as surgeon in the Bengal Army had explored about the language and ethnography of the Pathans because he worked mainly on the Afghan frontier and wrote extensively on the culture, language and traditions of the people within his charge. The most pertinent and fabulous here is, *A Grammar of the Pukkhtoor PukshtoLanguage*, the first book written by any

British official on Pashto grammar. (Bellow: 1867: 441). However, the credit for producing the most comprehensive work on Pashto language during colonial period goes to Raverty who joined the 3rd Bombay Native Infantry in 1843. His individual zeal and enthusiasm steered him to devote a considerable portion of his time to be acquainted with indigenous languages particularly Pashto because his service on both sides of the border i.e. in Afghanistan and Peshawar, drew his attention to the language of the Afghans. He formalized his efforts of learning Pashto by joining the tutelage of Qazi Abdur Rahman (Raverty, 1867: 201) who taught him extensively when the former was posted in Peshawar during 1849-50. By dint of his perseverance he received remarkable achievement in 1855 when he published his first Pashto work, *A Grammar of the Pukhto, Pushto or Language of the Afghans*. In 1860 he accomplished a Pashto dictionary. This comprehensive Pashto to English dictionary was consisting of more than thousand pages. (Jan, 2010: 5-6). He studied old Pashto text at a time when there was scarcity of literature and the readers had to rely on few *Dewans* and oral poetry. In this respect he himself admitted the difficulties and hardship he faced:

Pushto manuscripts of any antiquity are now become scarce, even amongst the Afghans whose language it is. This has, doubtless, been caused by the numerous civil convulsions which Afghanistan has undergone during the last sixty years, in which period the cultivation of the Afghan language has, comparatively, declined. Hence, few works now to be met with are generally full of errors, from the fact of the Katibs, or Copyists, being, with rare exceptions, persons wholly unacquainted with the Pushto language, and not Afghans, who are, generally, indifferent writers. (Raverty, 1867: 203).

However, by taking extensive surveillance of available sources, he succeeded to produce two other works. Like other scholars of the time he preferred an oriental title for his book, *Gulshan-i-Roh: Afghan Poetry and Prose* which was published in 1860. It was basically an assortment of ten poetical and six prose works he had compiled from antediluvian manuscripts in his

personal possession which comprised poets and writers like Akhund Darwezah, Babu Jan, Abdur Rahman Baba and Khushal Khan Khattak etc. His constant affection with native language and literature enabled him to produce another significant work, *Selections from the Poetry of the Afghan; from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century* in 1862. Even after getting retirement from army in 1864 he unremittingly engrossed with learning and writing. In 1904 he produced *The Pushto Manual* which was a stunning blend of grammar, exercises, dialogues, phrases, proverbs and vocabulary. Hence, Raverty's significant writings, compilations, documentations and collections really set a precedent for others writers. As the best-known expert and principal pioneer of the colonial era, he rendered inimitable services for the promotion and preservation of Pashto literature. (Jan, 2010: 5-6).

Regarding the literature produced during the colonial period particularly by the British writers, J. Lobera states, "the colonial writer is a person who's individual and corporate interest depended on the existence of the colonial order." (Lobera, 1974: 8). It exhibits that he considered the colonial literature of little value which needs to be cross-checked with other records and improved in the light of empiricism. Although P. Winch also contends that "western reports of exotic cultures are value-laden and inadequate" yet these reports should not be thoroughly neglected as they could be consulted to discern the colonial mentality and British imperial policy. (Winch, 1980: 114). The argument of Winch that a culture can only be understood from within its own unique framework is also supported by the interpretive school associated with Clifford Geertz. (Lindholm, 1996: 12). Charles Lindholm is more critical about the colonial writings, reports and ethnographies by expressing, "the men who wrote these documents had their own particular interests in mind as the British Raj attempted either to dominate or to accommodate the rebellious Pathan peoples of the north-western border in what is now Afghanistan and the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) of Pakistan." (Lindholm, 1996: 4).

Conclusion

Indeed, the decline of Mughul Empire in India provided a great opportunity to the British arrival and gradual penetration across the subcontinent. The north-western borderlands were the remotest region of their empire that came under their influence very late. They designed a unique scheme of action by developing a special structure of indirect administration after a deep surveillance of the physical features of the region and people of the surrounding as well. With their advent, the colonial masters observed the society of the region (nowadays FATA) mostly engaged in constant nomadic movement. The society around the region was thus, postural in nature and essence. With this sharp understanding of the geography, demography, climate and environment of the region on the one hand and life-style, livelihood and socio-economic engagements of its people on the other, the colonial think-tank decided to take special care of the region for the sake of ulterior objectives. The protection of the north western parts of the British Indian Empire from Russian aggression was one of them. The formation of tribes, allocation of lands to particular tribes, making the local population responsible for the security of colonial infrastructure and installations etc. ultimately damaged the nomadic movements and drastically transformed the nomadic society of FATA into an artificial tribal construct – premature tribalism. This shift from nomadism to tribalism was, thus, not natural but artificial. With this unnatural shift, the characteristics of both the social phenomena were mixed up which created an enigma in the academia at large.

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