

Book review of ‘The Real Pashtun Question’

Reviewer: Hurmat Ali Shah

Looking inwards

It becomes a tenuous exercise fraught with controversies, knee-jerk reactions, labels of in house informer, a turncoat and allegations of being insensitive to the pain of the people when the culture of a group of people who is facing systematic discrimination in an asymmetric federal structure is scrutinized, even if the ones doing the scrutiny belong to that same group. But the internal discourse and values need to be challenged as all the evils in the society or culture may not be the result of external manipulation, in most cases the state. Centuries old traditions and cultural systems may provide a fertile ground for the state to prey upon such intrinsic evils in the society to engineer the population for its nefarious designs. In “The Real Pashtun Question”, Farhat Taj dissects the internal cultural narratives and male-dominated public spaces to find the answer that why the Pashtun lands have been in the grip of extremism and why the state is able to make it the ground for its policy of strategic depth. Farhat Taj hails from Kohat in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, was Assistant Professor at Kohat University of Science and Technology and is now based in Norway and working as a researcher. The book presents exhaustive details of events, especially in Kurram, and the details are seen and analyzed in theoretical framework to reach at consistent explanations.

Chapter one occupies one-third of the book and presents the Shia-Sunni conflict in Kurram in detail. The author has described the historical mode of conflict resolution between the Shia and Sunni tribes and through anecdotal as well as documented evidence has shown that there existed a goodwill and mutual trust between the Sunni and Shia tribes. For example the main mosque in Parachinar, the capital city of upper Kurram which is Shia dominated as against the lower Kurram where Sunnis are in majority, the Central Jumaat Ahle-e-Sunnat, was built on the land donated by the Shia Turi tribe and then a person from the Sunni Jaji tribe was made custodian of the mosque. The Shias in Kurram as surrounded by Sunnis always relied on the state for their protection and the political administration of the agency from the British era played an active role in intervening at the right time to dissolve any crisis.

The political administration resolved issues among the tribes in 1961, 1972 and 1973, but things changed with the advent of Afghan Jihad. Parachinar is only 100 km away from Kabul. Kurram’s landmass extends into three important Afghanistan’s provinces: Khost, Paktia and Ningarhar. This extension is called Parrot’s beak. Just on the other side of Parachinar, in Afghanistan lays Tora Boora, the now famous mountain because of heavy US bombardment in pursuit of Osama and his fleeing ranks after the invasion of Afghanistan. Because of the strategic location of Kurram and especially Parachinar, it was of importance for Pakistan in the Afghan Jihad. The Arab Mujahedeen brought with themselves the rabid anti-Shia ideology and they made allies with the local Sunnis in their Shia hatred. Providing safe havens to the Mujahdeen became existential threat to the Shias of Kurram, and they started to resist their land being made as launching pads for Jihad in Afghanistan. Zia changed the demography of the agency by rehabilitating 350,000 Afghan refugees in Kurram, and this made Shias a minority in Kurram. Later these refugees were motivated to cleanse the lower Kurram from all Shias who then relocated to the upper Kurram. The Shia of Kurram braved multiple assaults on their land from Taliban with no assistance from the security forces. Also leadership vacuum was created, by the respectable elders of the agency and surrounding agencies being killed in targeted attacks and thus the conventional mode of solving the disputes was rendered ineffective and the establishment tried to introduce Haqqanis as the alternate leadership for mediation. The author has identified three main reasons for the oppressed state the Shias of Kurram are in. First, the surrounding Sunni tribes eye the lands which belongs to Shia tribes according to

'Kaaghazat-e-Maal', the official land records, second the state has manipulated this rivalry and have accommodated anti-Shia militants in the agency, and third, the dominant discourse in Pashtun society is formed by the Tablighi Jumaat which is a puritan Wahabi movement and its message often has anti-Shia streak.

The government and state can't be absolved from its role in entrenching extremist mindset in the Pashtun lands as in 1984,1985 and in 1990,1991 out of the Auqaaf fund, Rs. 15,969 million were given to forty-two Madrassas in the then NWFP. After discussing the Taliban's nature, the vacuum created by constant infighting between Mujahideen leadership and contrasting it to trans-national Jehadi movements like Al-Qaeda which wants to establish a global Islamic rule, the author argues that Taliban though don't have trans-national motives but yet they are inspired by the same sources. What has given Taliban a wider acceptance and what makes them easily fit into the social milieu is, according to the author, their embodiment of much of Pashtuns' 'constitutive narratives'. Constitutive narratives are stories and images that shape outlook of a community and represent core cultural values. Taliban have taken these narratives a step further by couching them in global Islamist philosophy. The male egocentric view which Taliban share with Pashtuns is based on badal (revenge), tarboorwali (rivalry), Siali (competition) and ghairat (honor), which form the basis of Pashtunwali.

Another evil in Pashtun culture is the almost-acceptable practice of pedophilia. According to the author this emerges from the benevolent sexism which sees women and children as the weak and men as the superiors who take care of them. In Pashtun culture benevolent sexism feeds into the power paradigm and coupled with the sex being the taboo topic, pedophilia becomes socially acceptable. Like in all collectivist societies, shame in Pashtun society is social, which force the instances of pedophilia to be hushed up, thus making the practice of pedophilia an open secret in Pashtun society. The Tablighi culture by its insistence on quietism and acceptance of 'fate' has made the society to comply with the dictates of the evils such as benevolent sexism, and in case of misogyny this male-dominance has been sanctioned with religious and spiritual blessing.

The evils in any culture can be fought by laws defined and meticulously implemented by the state, and by social movements having wide acceptance which are meant to reform the social evils, and by the convergence between efforts of the state and the social movements on the reform agenda. But unfortunately the state is not interested in reforming the society through legislation. Instead the state is adamant in exploiting these very evils for its own policies. Fata remains a lawless society as the century old FCR has made the society static while in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa the state has invested heavily in Madaris and Tabligh is adding further to the religiosity which results in more extremism. Khudai Khidmatgar led by Bacha Khan was one social reform movement having wider appeal and following but the British suppressed it because of its affiliation with All India National Congress and later the Pakistani state suppressed it because it was seen as a threat to the integrity of the country. Thus the only genuine movement which could have broken the vicious cycle of cultural evils was made a victim to state's political objectives.

The book is an important addition to the scholarship on Pashtun culture and the relationship of Pashtuns to Pakistan. This book brings timely and relevant value to the current debate going on terrorism and the way to control it, and the stereotypes propagated by media and instances of racial profiling, and the on-and-off ruckus of Fata reforms. The anthropological research is presented in easy to digest terms and is backed by exhaustive details which make it a must read for anyone interested in understanding the problems which have engulfed the Pashtun lands.

