

## The Pashtun Tribal System and Issues of Security

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### Abstract

*Pashtun tribal system is a very unique phenomenon of the entire Pashtuns. Being a complete code of life for most of them. This code guides them in all walks of life. In terms of its genealogy, it is very close to Islam and is considered as code of life for them. The tribal structure of Pashtuns has changed a lot during the last 36 years in which the dominating role of Maliks and tribal elders have been excessively reduced giving place to that of mullah. Soviet intervention in Afghanistan followed by the U.S. intervention was a turning point in changing the entire tribal structure of Pashtuns. The tribal Areas were converted into areas meant for the acts of barbarism, terrorism and extremism and provided sanctuaries to the insurgents.*

### Key Words:

Pashtun, U.S,  
Tribal Areas,  
Security,  
Border, Clan

### Introduction

The word tribe and tribal are used to denote a particular group or caste of people in some countries of the world. Normally 'Tribe' is used in a derogatory way to denote small ethnic groups who lived as underdeveloped minorities, far from the majority 'cultural and social mainstream (Glatzer, 2002). It was used to describe the 'primitive or savage people in most of the parts of the Arab world and other parts such as Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, it is not the only sense in which "tribe 'represents a particular or small group. Other substitute words such as 'Qam', 'Qabila', 'il', 'tayfa' etc. have no such derogatory connotations. They are used with pride and dignity to denote as a mark of distinction from the rest of the people. Referring to a tribe connotes to be distinguishable having an old lineage with a peculiar characteristic of being dependable.

By tribe, is generally meant, a communal section based on a genealogical notion of societal configuration. Such a society usually has a separate nomenclature as being descended from a common ancestry (Glatzer, 2002). A tribe is normally constituted on the basis of common ancestry as being distinct from others. A tribe, like an ethnic group, is characterized by one or more

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equivalents. Tribes have close cohesive power but are sometimes arranged on the basis of their genealogical scale. By attaining cohesiveness, diverse tribes may unite together to form a separate section in relation to another section that has come into existence as a result of tribes who are genealogically closer to one another than to the tribes of the first segment.

Pashtuns are said to have developed the world's largest tribal system (Spain, 1963). They are said to be, "the most tribalized group of people in the world" living across both sides of the Pak-Afghan border with their peculiar way of life (Smith, 2009: 208). They think themselves to be a homogeneous group with their sense of self, identity and community (Liebel, 2007, p.492). An important aspect of the tribal system lies in the fact that tribal life can harbor a vigorous sense of social cohesiveness accompanied by arrogance and selfhood. This system inculcates the spirit of guarding, welcoming and taking care of one another by having allegiance to strict customs prevalent in the society that bind their connections as tribal members to their ancestors, land, and deity. Trust and faithfulness is the outcome of this proximity that keep them bonded to uphold their rights, duties and obligations towards one another (Ronfieldt, 2006, pp.71-72). Besides, sharing common traditional system, the tribal system of Pashtuns encompasses three major characteristics; descend from one common male ancestor, segmentary composition and acephalous leadership (Ahmad, 1977, pp.14-17). The common or dominating male ancestor often identifies his tribe after his name, for example the Yusufzai after Yusuf or the Ahmadzai after Ahmad. Blood relation is not the only criterion to determine the tribe as sometimes it so happens that a person who while residing in a tribal area may not belong to a particular tribe but becomes so much subsumed in the tribe that he considers it to be his own (Ahmad, 1977, pp.14-17). Normally pedigree is recognized after the male line resulting in the organization of the tribal system through patriarchy.

Segmentary lineage encompasses that the society comprises parts or segments that have close cohesiveness and are weaved together by the by the common bonds of various relations that arise out of a central body. The segment is not a complete whole in itself but is divided and sub divided into smaller branches and sub branches. Of all this segmentation, the individual is the main character, around whom the whole society revolves. The individual is a member of a sub-section or *Kor*, then *Khel*, then a sub-clan, then a clan, a tribe and finally the entire Pashtun ethnic group, which is supposed to have descended from Qais Abdur Rashid, who is said to have been the first Pashtun to accept Islam (Amato, 2010). Some Pashtuns are also of the view that they trace their ancestry to Daru Nika, or Baba Khalid (Hazrat Khalid Bin Waleed-the legendry general of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)). The name of a common ancestor is not as important for them as they believe to belong to one huge kinship group or family. But rivalry among close relatives and particularly among the first cousins is an

important characteristic of the entire Pashtun tribal system. As times passes, men inherit small pieces of land and plots from their ancestors and land disputes arise among them mainly over the division of lands and houses.

The third characteristic of the Pashtun is its acephalous nature which means “without a head”. Such a system does not indoctrinate the superiority or chieftainship of an individual who can run the affairs of the tribe and hence it leads to the establishment of classless society where leadership is based on individual magnetism. The cephalous society is more likely to be prone to segmentation and diversification as the segments may revolt against the authority of the charismatic leader. The Pashtun tribes of this category are mostly non-hierarchical where there is no single leader with whom one can negotiate in case of any dispute and issue (Amato, 2010). Any effort to bring about any reform in the Pashtun tribal system is not welcomed and leads to further complexities as was witnessed in the late 1970s when efforts were made by the Communist government in Afghanistan. The Soviet intervention in 1979 with the aim of reforming the country as per their desires did not bring about any change in the system. Similarly, the withdrawal of the foreign forces from Afghanistan resulting in the civil war, the rise and fall of Taliban, and recently the various cleanup operations by the government of Pakistan did not change their stance of accepting the initiatives imposed upon them. But it is also a fact that most of these areas were swiped of terrorism, militancy and their sanctuaries were destroyed by the government.

The tribal structure of Pashtun suffered a lot as a result of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in which more than one million Pashtuns were killed and millions of them were displaced from their mother land and entered as refugees into Pakistan (Amato, 2010). The tribal leadership was also affected by this war as traditionally this system consisted of the *Khan* or *Malik*, a spokesperson of the administration and the clannish spiritual manager or *Mullah*. The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan weakened the khan; no government official or representative was supposed to be present in the refugee camp while *mullah* was the only figure to be present in the camp. The status of *Mullah* gained great momentum during this era. During this time refugees camps were run by the *mullahs* who used to be *Deobandi* or *Salafi*. This refers to a school of religious thought who claim to have adherence to the belief and practical manifestation of Islam as was practiced by the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) and his *Sahaba kiram* and the negation of “innovation” in any matter. By inculcating this spirit among the common men and speeches through loudspeakers and media made the *mullah* an important character of their society. Thus the *mullah* became a strong man in the tribal system and normally exercised the function of a leader and provided patronage to the people at large.

The government of Pakistan played the most significant role in strengthening the tribal system of FATA. During this era, support for *Mujahidin* was extended

by the Inter Services Agency (ISI) of Pakistan in which the Soviets failed to win the war against Afghanistan and subsequently the Taliban emerged to further the strategic interest of Pakistan in Afghanistan (Amato, 2010). Huge number of *Pashuns* and other Afghans took shelter in Pakistan across the Durand Line for seeking safety of their lives. It is also important to note that one of the important goals during 1990s sought by Pakistan as regarding the support of Taliban was the establishment of bases for the terrorists who could find an easy safe haven after attacking India in the undecided part of Kashmir. Thus by creating sanctuaries in Afghanistan for the Kashmiri insurgents, the Taliban helped Pakistan avoid American sanctions as a state sponsor of terrorism (Rashid, 2000). But most importantly, top priority of Pakistan in seeking a friendly regime in Afghanistan was to have a 'strategic depth' in Afghanistan against India. By doing so, Pakistan could have enough geographic space for its assets and important installations against Indian invasion (Hussain, 2005). This was one of the most important objectives of Pakistan in 1990s in Afghanistan partly to avoid any untoward Indian attack and partly to have a friendly regime in Kabul since both Pakistan and Afghanistan enjoyed a long porous border which is very important for the security paradigm of Pakistan.

The notion of strategic depth in Afghanistan by Pakistan had an inherent problem for the Pashtun population of both the countries. The Pak-Afghan border which alienated British India from Afghanistan actually demarcates the Pashtun brethren between the two neighboring countries along the border. On many occasions, Afghanistan has tried to covet the Pashtun parts of Pakistan such as the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, FATA and Balochistan. This support for Taliban by Pakistanis was with a view to emphasize the Islamist identity as opposed to Pashtun nationalism that could divide Pakistan (Hussain, 2005). An irredentist Afghanistan and even the notion of Pashtun Nationalism were not in favor of the strategic depth and hence stood against the territorial integrity of Pakistan. To curb the notion of Pashtun Nationalism, *madrassa* played the most important role in this regard. Thousands of Afghan Taliban was educated in the religious *madrassas* of Pakistan since the intervention of the Russians into Afghanistan till their period of withdrawal. So, Pakistani backing for them during the period of 1994 till 2001 contributed a lot to the strengthening role of *Mullahs* at the cost of tribal elders who had a final saying in all important matters of the areas.

Prior to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, *mullah* was just a traditional theologian who could give a clarion identify for the holy war against the infidels and could bring the people together for the grounds of shielding religion but had no saying in the decision making power of the area. Their only function was to be seated at the exterior side the *Jirga*, (an organized gathering of the elders of the Pashtun tribes) and pray for the success of the assembly or any decision taken (Nawaz & et al, 2009). They were subservient to the *Maliks* and tribal elders and remained dependent on them for their income and security. These religious

leaders, who had studied at the religious madrassas of Pakistan, changed the entire tribal system and adopted the concept of *Ummah* instead of Pashtun Nationalism. They appealed to the common mind and preached to rule according to the spirit of Islam or *sharia* instead of traditional *Jirga* (Oliver, 1989:14). The main difference between *Jirga* and *Sharia* is that the former is more classless in character and its decisions are of consultative nature while the latter is directive in nature and its decisions are binding on all (Liebel, 2007:492).

Madrassas and refugee camps in Pakistan had a deep impact on the tribal Pashtun as they brought them together under the umbrella of a non-tribal, religious environment (Giustozzi, 2008, p.44). Thus *ulema* became a stronger force in the decision making power of the tribal areas. Pashtuns who were educated in the religious madrassas of Pakistan, particularly KP and Balochistan, also did away with their past traditions and got used to the education and tradition which they received from the less-educated theologians in the religious institutions. It is an undenyng fact that the religious madrassas contributed a lot to change the tribal structure of FATA but the semi-educated mullahs who usually administered those madrassas taught them a version of Islamic law or *Sharia* that had a great tinge of *Pashtunwali* (Rashid, 2000: 89-90). This resulted in the creation of a group of tribalised warriors who claimed to fight solely for the cause of Islam but they had a strong bent of social attitudes, beliefs and customs of Pashtuns. These *ulema* though professed to preach and stand for the cause of Islam yet *Pashtunwali* pervaded deep into their basic philosophy of life.

Despite changes in the tribal structure of the Pashtuns, the system of tribes' identity has not disappeared from the Pashtun landscape. The Taliban rejects the clannish and cultural identities in its creed yet the authority of tribalism pervades deep into their blood. In the words of Thomas Rutting, "each Pashtun knows his or her clan and sub-clan that he or she is supposed to belong, and cannot be obliterated by social disharmony, dislodgment and societal segmentation" (Rutting , 2009, p.12). Rutting (2009) also explains how the configuration and deeds of the Taliban, particularly in conscription, operation and sequence is deeply interwoven into the Pashtun tribalism (Rutting , 2009, p.12). The entire Pashtun tribal system has undergone considerable changes during the last 36 years resulting in the paramount role of the *ulema* in the overall affairs of the clannish composition but the cryptogram of *Pashtunwali* is still there to be kept in mind while dealing with any particular issue.

In the current war on terrorism, some prominent people of FATA including tribal elders and local leaders of the Pashtuns have lost their lives. As a result of this war, more than five hundred (500) elders, *maliks* and local leaders have been killed by the actions of commandos and guided missiles (Liwai). The local Taliban are also involved in this barbarous act of killing of tribal elders and *maliks* besides the law enforcement agencies for their being termed as pro-Taliban. This is evident from the blasts and target killings in many of the *jirgas*

and traditional systems conducted by the *maliks* and tribal elders by participating in important decisions.

## **Pashtunwali**

It is the customary cryptogram of life for the entire Pashtuns and provides guidance to community procedures and errands of the Pashtun societal configuration. Based upon the three major aspects of *badal* (revenge), *melmastia* (hospitality) and *nanawatai* (asylum), Pashtunwali is of paramount importance to the Pashtuns. *Badal* is not only confined to revenge but also covers within its ambit the meaning of less common reciprocation of any good deed (Liebel, 2007, p.507). These three pillars of Pashtunwali are based upon the concept of honor or *nang*. It is important to mention that *nang* is not an analogous word for the respect still it is capable of being termed as “representing a man’s action and moral obligation to protect the inviolability of his person, his property, and his women”. Inability to maintain honor is regarded as a great insult and is tantamount to ‘*Dauz*’, a person who lacks respect. A person lacking respect is despised in the entire community and faces difficulty in getting married, looking for an employment, and is supposed to lead the life a recluse.

*Badal* is indispensable in the case of an offense or wrong to one’s self or one’s relatives and can be extended with blood, cash or woman as a substitute or *Swara* in the most common parlance of tribal system but these remedies cannot be sufficient in the case of death. For retaliation of murder committed, blood can be a substitute for the revenge (Lindholm, 1982, p.77). But those who show patience or wait for the revenge for years or decades are very much regarded and are hailed by folk stories. Taking revenge may be provocative not only by showing aggressiveness but also by Vengeance can be invoked not only by aggressive acts but also by simply throwing challenge, or even supposing to challenge the popular name of a person or his clan (Jim, 2009).

An important connected feature of *badal* is the people substitution system where a young man or member of a family steps in for older fighters if the older fighters are killed (Smith, 2009, p.199). A younger member of a family may be working somewhere while an older fighter may remain preoccupied with his arms and off fighting but when he dies or is killed then the young man may jump into the ground and take up arms. In such a case the younger man will go the same unit that was served by his old father or relative. The rationale of this replacement scheme is to keep allegiance to the elder’s *andiwai*, or “comrades in arms” or the consistency of the assemblage. This method of family replacement is prevalent in the rebellious people (Coghlan, 2009, p.136).

*Nanawatia* is closely linked to *melmastia* but is different from *melmastia* in the sense that in the latter the host provides hospitality or *melmasita* but in the former the host is also the guardian for his guest besides providing *melmastia*

(Lindholm, 1982, pp.231-233). Nanawatia is extended to the persons who need shelter and is even offered to those enemies who produce themselves for surrender before the enemies. Another connotation of Nanawatia is the clemency towards the injury committed. Clemency or showing pardon is extremely hard for the Pashtuns to grant, but once it is sought, it is bestowed upon with great honor and dignity (Liebel, 200, p.507).

The concepts of *Nanawatia* and *melmastia* have altered in the recent years. If an alien is the source of conflict, Pashtunwali goes against the dictum of continued *melmastia* or *nanawatia*, but makes allowance for the ouster of the alien agent. According to Mariam Abou Zahab, tribal entrepreneurs would port the alien, particularly Arab militants under the pretext of *melmastia* and *nanawatia* but in reality may obtain cash from their guest and by utilizing it for gaining fame and authority in the area (Nawaz & et al, 2009, pp.23-25). Parallel to the characteristics of pashtunwali, is the role of mullahs and militants in the tribal structure of FATA.

### **Mullahs and Militants**

Another important element of the tribal structure of FATA is Mullahs and the militants that makes its way into securitizing accounts of Pak-Afghan border and caters for the violent Islamic militancy and radical Islam (Pineu & Fleschenberg, 2012, pp.212). In the pre-Soviet era in Afghanistan, the role of mullahs in Afghanistan as well as in the tribal areas of Pakistan was limited one, dependent upon the landlords and *maliks* for their survival. The post-Soviet intervention era, brought drastic changes in the entire structure of the tribal areas of Pakistan, i.e. the western border region with Afghanistan. As a result of huge inflow of refugees to Pakistan, most of the young Afghan generation became Taliban in the religious madrassas of Pakistan and got themselves educated in the semi-literate madrassas which empowered them more in the decision making power of the tribal areas.

This resulted in mixing politics with religion and the Pak-Afghan border area provided ample place and scope for the infiltration of insurgent activities. The inflow and outflow of Afghan refugees made interference by the security agencies into the border area by facing the jeopardy posed by political mobilization of Islamic militants (Pineu & Fleschenberg, 2012). This mixture of politics with religion in the western tribal areas of Pakistan, coupled with “ungovernable and tribal structure” and “warlike character” of the local population made the area the most explosive one. As a result, a diverse phenomena emerged in the shape of Taliban branching out the Afghan Taliban, Pakistan Taliban with further sub-branches and several Islamist organizations, tribal militias and radical clerics (Markey, 2008).

## **Pashtunwali and Islam**

Islam is very close to Pashtuns and plays the most significant part in their lives. Islam is an important component of their lives and Pashtunwali is very closely related to their common life. Like Islam, Pashtunwali provides them with an ethical code which is abided by all Pashtuns (Liwal). Among some of its common characteristics is to revenge every insult and respect every guest. Every Pashtun often remains ready to protect his honour, family, clan, or tribe's honour and sacrifices his life, liberty and property for the same. Pashtunwali and Islam are so inter-related that even the poets have used poetic lines to show the close relationship of the two. A famous poet of Pashtunwali has very aptly described that, "We will enter paradise through/along with Pashtunwali". Pashtunwali is based upon the collective wisdom of its people and does not originate from one authority and therefore remains prone to debate and reinterpretation of the people according to the changing needs and requirements of the time. With this phenomenon it is closer to democratic customs which suits the wishes of the people (Liwal). With the exception of a minor class, majority of Pashtuns belong to the Hanafi School of thought (religion) with their own customs and traditions that are usually very common to the entire Pashtun areas.

With the dawn of 9/11 attacks, certain groups emerged on the screen of FATA that exploited their own land and people for inhuman, un-Islamic and anti-Pashtunwali values. Consequently, a reign of terror and bloodshed coupled with killing and beheading erupted in the area where all opponents including the tribal elders, politicians and prominent people were killed in the most inhuman way. Thus a region of peace and freedom-loving people lost its prestigious position of Pashtunwali and hospitality ushering in an era of disgrace and was presented before the world as the area of terrorism, extremism besides providing sanctuaries to the insurgents. The local population has suffered a lot as a result of this catastrophe and most of them are displaced from their homes and properties and have been termed as the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). Military Operations were conducted in the areas to clean the area of terrorism with Operation Zarb-e-Azab still in progress to purge the area of all roots of terrorism and extremism.

Tribal system is common in some of the countries of the world such as Arab countries, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The tribal system in Pakistan and particularly the Pashtun tribal system is unique in the sense that it has certain characteristics which are common to the entire Pashtun tribal structure. Common ancestry is the most distinguishing characteristic of this system. Normally a tribe is known after the name of a dominating tribal elder or Khan. Besides common characteristics among the Pashtuns, rivalry over petty issues is also a matter of common routine.



The uniqueness of the Pashtun tribal structure changed a lot as a result of the Soviet intervention of Afghanistan in 1979 resulting in the huge inflow of Afghaan refugees to Pakistan. These refugees normally got their religious education in madrassas of KPK and adjacent tribal areas of Pakistan along the Pak-Afghan border. During this war the Soviet failed to strengthen their foothold on the surface of Afghanistan as the government of Afghanistan was helped by the U.S. and Pakistan for their personal interest. The government of U.S wanted to block the spread of communism which posed a direct threat to their interest while Pakistan wanted to have a friendly government in Kabul to remain safe on the western border as Pakistan was already unsafe on its eastern border. This resulted in the creation of a new phenomenon termed as Taliban which excessively increased the role of mullahs in the decision making power of the tribal affairs.

The uniqueness of the tribal system is mainly due to the code of '*Pashtunwali*' which provides guidelines and basic principles for the transaction of disposal of matters of day to day life. The three pillars of this code add to the novelty to its nature. *Badal* is not only used in the negative sense but also refers to positive activities as to compensate someone for any good deed. It supplements the theory of tit for tat whether evil or good actions.

The tribal areas of Pakistan lying to the western side of our country are very important for the security paradigm of our country. These areas have played an important role in establishing a close linkage between Afghanistan and Pakistan but this linkage got converted into an atmosphere of mistrust and enmity between the two neighbouring countries particularly in the post-9/11 scenario. There is greater need to restore the atmosphere of trust and harmony between the two countries. Pashtuns along both sides of the Durand line consider themselves to be one nation as most of them close family ties and relationship while some still get into matrimonial relationship on account of sharing the same tribal values and traditions. Pashtuns across the Durand line are so closely-knit by family relations and brethren that they term themselves to be identical in all respects. Islam and their personal code of *Pashtunwali* is very identical in the terms of *modus operandi* and *modus vivendi* and as most of the Pashtuns refer themselves to be born Muslims.

One of the hard realities of life is the fact that Pashtuns have been described as the terrorists particularly in the post-9/11 era. Most of the military operations were conducted in the tribal agencies of Pakistan while Operation Zarb-e-Azab is still in progress with the aim to exterminate terrorism from the Pashtun society and tribal areas. The stigma of terrorism and extremism has changed the entire Pashtun tribal structure with the reducing role of maliks and tribal elders that had a final say in the decision making power of important matters. The Afghan refugees that migrated to Pakistan as a result of Soviet intervention into Afghanistan got their religious education in most of the madrassas of KPK and

FATA at the hands of the semi-literate mullahs that had little knowledge of religion and termed themselves Taliban. This resulted in the creation of Taliban in the landscape of the world politics which gained a bad name for the entire Pashtuns and were termed as terrorists. This also deprived the pashtuns of their basic tenets of Pashtunwali that was famous for its peculiar code.

The above discussion shows the grim situation that has pushed FATA into a state of barbarism and extremism in which survival of human life is impossible. To get FATA out of this quagmire, it is the duty of our government, regional as well as International community to find out a viable solution to the issue of insecurity so that it may once again regain its lost prestige of peace and prosperity.

Negotiations and dialogue are needed to be started with the stakeholder and local population for the reestoration of their core values that has provided guidelines to the entire Pashtuns for centuries in the day to day transaction of their business of life. It is also important to know the culture, traditions, social, economic and political values and get them flourished.

## Conclusion

It is an undenying fact that the Durand line or the Pak-Afghan border has grown into a battle field in the post 9/11 era on account of Pakistan's decision to provide logistic support to the NATO forces for its operation in Afghanistan. During the last 15 years, the border region of Pakistan and Afghanistan has gained a notorious position in the regional politics. The Islamist militants have engaged themselves in violent campaign not only against the law enforcement agencies but also against the local power brokers and general population. These non-state actors and violent forces have put a direct threat to the writ of the Federal as well as the Provincial government of KP. They take recourse to both discourses and murderous attacks for getting their designs realised and the situation on the Pak-Afghan border has turned into a battleground between two hot enemies. The border has proved to be more dangerous than even the Pak-India border with a deployment of 1,83,000 pak Army. The security situation in the border region has its ramifications to the settled areas of KP and some of the settled areas such as Peshawar, Mardan, Charsaddah, Bannu and Dera Ismail Khan have been the targets of terrorist attacks and extremism. Terrorists and extremists depict themselves to be upholding the cause of *Jihad* in the tribal as well as the settled areas of KP but this interpretation of them is based on misperception of Islam as they are fighting against the state machinery of Pakistan and law enforcement agencies. Suicide attacks, target killings and killing the innocent students of educational institutes is not a *Jihad* but sheer barbarism.

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