

RESISTANCE OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS OF SWAT AGAINST THE BRITISH IMPERIALISM IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY: AN APPRAISAL

Asghar Khan*
Dr. Kishwar Sultana†

ABSTRACT

The valley of Swat is situated in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. Historically the people of Swat presented tough resistance to those invaders and rulers who wanted to subjugate them. Religious leaders have always played pivotal role in the resistance against external aggressions. The religious leaders resisted against the British imperialism in 1863 and 1897 and stopped the British advance in this region. Present research aims at examining the role of religious leaders with special reference to the resistance of Abdul Ghafoor and Sadullah Khan against the British imperialism. It would be examined in the article that how these religious leaders persuaded and united the tribal elders against the British. The primary and secondary sources have been used in the article. This study will provide a ground for understanding the recent history of Swat for the researchers, students of history and political science and general readers.

Key words: Abdul Ghafoor, British imperialism, resistance, Sadullah Khan, Swat.

Introduction

The historical and beautiful valley of Swat has been accorded greater importance by both the invaders and travelers due to its geo-strategic location and charming beauty. The Aryans, the Greeks and the Persians came to Swat in pursuance of their political and economic interests (Sultan-i-Rome 2009, 3). Buddhism came and flourished here. In the propagation of the religion of Buddha, Swat gained the importance to the extent that it became one of the centers of Buddhism and there were about 1400 Buddhist Monasteries in Swat. The Chinese, the most prominent among others, visited the valley for worship and spiritual satisfaction. The Muslim era began in Swat when Mahmud Ghaznavi attacked on Swat and defeated the Hindu Shahi

* Ph.D Scholar Department of History Allama Iqbal Open University Islamabad
Email: Asgharkhan815@gmail.com

† Chairperson Department of History Allama Iqbal Open University Islamabad
Email: Kishwar.sultana@aiou.edu.pk

ruler, Raja Gira in 1001 AD (Hay 1934, 28). The Mughals also came here for subjugation of the valley, who were followed by the British (Balala 2000, 9). When the British occupied Peshawar in 1849, a religious leader, Abdul Ghafoor felt it a threat for the independence of Swat. He called a *Jirga* of tribal elders in Swat and suggested for the installation of a ruler for Swat. The tribal elders agreed with him and on his suggestion, a descendant of Pir Baba, Syed Akbar Shah of Sithana was installed as a king for Swat in 1849. Syed Akbar Shah tried to consolidate the state and bring reforms in the society. He failed to establish a strong and well-organized government, because the people who lived independently for a long time, were not ready to follow rules and regulations made by the king (Barikoti 1999, 29).

Abdul Ghafoor and the Ambela Expedition

Swat has witnessed the emergence of a number of religious leaders who have played pivotal role in the society. Among these religious leaders one was, Abdul Ghafoor, popularly known as Saidu Baba. He was born at Jabrai, a small village of Swat in 1794 (Aamir 2009, 388). He was the son of Abdul Wahid Khan. He belonged to a Safi tribe of Mohmand. His parents migrated from Mohmand to Swat. As there was no educational institution in Swat in those days, therefore, after receiving some early education at home, he decided to go to other places for search of knowledge (Qadria 1977, 389).

He went to Brangola a village in district Dir and learnt reading and writing from a priest. There he also learnt the Holy Quran by heart. After acquiring basic education at Brangola, he went to Gujar Garhi, a village in district Mardan and became the student of Maulana Abdul Hakeem for some time (Nasar 1950, 4). After a while he went to Chamkanai a village in district Peshawar, where he received education from Abdullah Miangul. After that, he went to Ziarat Kaka Sahib a village in district Nowshera, where he became a disciple of Hazrat Mian Muhammad Naeem Kakakhel. Thus, he moved from place to place in search of knowledge (Qadria 1950, 389).

From his early life he was interested in spiritualism and Sufism. During his stay at Ziarat Kaka Sahib, he meditated at a mosque for spiritual exercise. In search of a spiritual guide he went to Peshawar and became the disciple of Hazratji Peshawari. In those days Hazratji Peshawari was a famous saint belonging to Naqashbandiyya order of Sufism. When he completed his spiritual training according to the Naqashbandiyya order, he decided to go to Tordher a village in district Swabi to become the disciple of Maulana Muhammad Shuaib, who was a famous Sufi of

Qadariyya order in those days (Khan 2016, 57). He took oath of allegiance to Sheikh Sahib and became his disciple. The sincerity and honesty of Abdul Ghafoor, so much impressed him that he paid full attention to him, and taught him about spiritualism. When he completed his spiritual training according to the Qadriyya order, Shaykh Sahib allowed him to preach the teachings of Qadariyya order (Qadri 1963, 150).

In 1816, he stayed in Beka, a small village near river Indus and lived there for twelve years. Due to his sanctity and holiness he got the attraction of the people and people gave him the title of the Akhund. From Beka, he went to and settled in Namal a small village in district Nowshera. After his stay at Namal for some time the people of Salim Khan invited him to their village. His popularity increased over the time at Salim Khan and due to his spiritual powers people gave him the title of *Buzurg*. After a brief stay at Salim Khan, he went to Qasmi a village in district Mardan. There the people of the village constructed a room for him in the mosque and he started living in that room. In 1835, he returned to Swat and stayed in a mosque at Maloch (Khan 2016, 60). From Maloch he went to Rangeela and after staying there for some time he went to Hoodigram. From Hoodigram he went to Marghuzar and settled down there. In the meantime, a delegation from Spal Bandai came to him and invited him to Spal Bandai, he accepted this offer and went to Spal Bandai. He married a pious lady belonging to the family of Nekpi Khel (Caroe 1984, 77). He left Spal Bandai in 1845 and went to Saidu Sharif where he spent the rest of his life, and tried to reform the people (Khan 2016, 363).

The British occupied Peshawar by defeating Sikhs in 1849 (Khan 1986, 299). For the purpose of strengthening their position in NWFP, the British thought it necessary to defeat the tribesmen of the Frontier Region. Hence, they focused their attention towards Sithana, which was an important center of the Hindustani Mujahidin, companions of Sayed Ahmad Shaheed Barailvi. After the death of Sayed Ahmad Shaheed Barailvi in 1831, in the battle of Balakot, the remaining Mujahidin settled down in Sithanah (Ahmad 2018, 300).

In 1858, the British compelled some tribesmen to expel the Hindustani Mujahidin from their areas. So, the Hindustani Mujahidin left Sithana and settled down at Malka. However, the Hindustani Mujahidin once again came to Sithana in 1861 (Ahmad 2018, 300). In 1863, the British decided to take action against the Mujahidin. There were some religious differences between Abdul Ghafoor and the Hindustani Mujahidin, because there was charge on the leader of Mujahidin, Maulana Abdullah that he is a Wahabi. The British knew that there is no unity between Abdul Ghafoor and the Hindustani Mujahidin, so, they thought that Abdul Ghafoor

will not support them against the British. Thus, they could easily defeat the Mujahidin (Rafi 1977, 27).

The Mujahidin were aware about the intentions of the British. They wrote letters to Pukhtun elders about the situation and wanted their support against the British. A letter wrote by Maulana Abdullah to Abdul Ghafoor reached the hands of the British, which stated:

These evil infidels want to destroy this land of beauty, especially Chamla (Buner) and Swat, and would annex it to their own kingdom. They want to destroy our religion and everything that belongs to us. You are therefore, requested not to ignore this important fact for the sake of the sanctity of Islam, Islamic teachings and our spiritual and temporal life. These infidels are extremely crafty and hypocritical. They would somehow reach these mountains and declared that they would not touch the tribesmen, and only want to subdue the Mujahidin, that they would not harm even one single hair of the tribesmen, and that they would return soon after they had defeated the Indian rebels. The British would also try to tempt the Pukhtun tribesmen with rich rewards. Now it is for you to counter the hypocrisy of the British, otherwise they would destroy you too whenever they got the opportunity. They would destroy you. They would usurp your wealth and all your belongings and violate the sanctity of your religion. It would then be too late to repent. We are, therefore, sounding a note of caution for your own good (Khan 1992, 303).

The commissioner of Peshawar declared that we do not want to fight the tribesmen but, only want to fight the Mujahidin. The British kept secret their mission of fighting with the Mujahidin. The British started their preparation from September, 1963. All troops arrived at Mardan, in October 1963. The troops were not concentrated at one place, so as to keep the people ignorant about their mission. The head quarter of Mujahidin was Malka. The British decided to reach Malka through Ambela Pass, because the people of this valley was not hostile to the British (Sabir 1986, 613). The Khans of this area had friendly relations with the British, this is why they did not stand against them in this fight. On one side, there was a very large and well equipped British army while on the other side, there was only a handful Mujahidin. Maulana Abdullah informed the tribesmen about the intentions of the British. He also wrote a letter to Abdul Ghafoor and sought his help. Abdul Ghafoor decided to help the Mujahidin against the British (Sabir 1992, 614).

It was a matter of concern for the British that Abdul Ghafoor has decided to help the Mujahidin. In this connection the British Commander, Reynell Taylor wrote to Abdul Ghafoor:

Why are you bent on shedding blood? The British Government is very powerful. The poor people of this area have no answer to our heavy artillery. Since you are an ascetic, you should keep to your monastery. Our sole purpose is to throw out the Mujahidin of Malka. Mind they are ones with whom you have always had difference of creed (Begum 1992, 47).

Abdul Ghafoor replied that no doubt the British government is very powerful, but there is another power which is more powerful, which destroyed the whole army of elephants through swallows, drowned Pharaoh in the ocean and killed Nimrod through mosquitoes. I may be a hermits, but it is not good to invade hermits like this. This attitude is not suitable with you. On the call of Abdul Ghafoor, the people decided to fight against the British army. The people of Swat, Buner and Bajaur went towards Ambela. General Chamberlain with a large army moved out on October 18, 1963 (Sabir 1986, 617). On October 20, the British troops reached the Ambela pass. Reynell Taylor, the commissioner who was with the column told that opposition was expected in the pass. When about one third of the pass was covered, the British troops received information that there are Bunerwals on the peak of the pass. When the Bunerwals saw the British forces, they opened fire on the British troops and prevented them from going ahead (Mahar n.d, 315). Chamberlain had come to know that it was not an easy task to pass the troops from Ambela pass. Tribesmen were all the time ready to attack in case of advance of the British troops towards Malka. Chamberlain informed the British Government through a telegram that the force had come to halt before getting out of the pass on 22nd October, 1963. He requested Taylor to arrange for the occupation of the lower portion of the pass with his foot levies (Frontier and Overseas Expeditions from India 1982, 244).

On the morning of 25th October, 1863, all the Mujahidin assembled on a top of hills opposite and close to pickets. Major Keyes advanced for dislodging them from their positions. He succeeded and took up a position on the ridge commanding the plains to which they had retreated (Frontier and Overseas Expeditions from India 1982, 245). Keyes ordered the Infantry to keep under cover and not to return the fire of the enemy. The shooters were selected and placed along the ridge from the reinforcement then arrived. They opened fire on the Mujahidin

and after some shots the Infantry advanced. Now the entire body of troops opened fire forcing the Mujahidin to retreat for the time being. The losses of the Mujahidin were 31 martyrs and 40 wounded, whereas the British troops also suffered from a great loss (Frontier and Overseas Expeditions from India 1982, 246). Abdul Ghafoor joined the Mujahidin on 27th October, 1863, with 120 horsemen, each representing a separate band of 30 to 40 footmen. The people of Buner came to know about the arrival of Abdul Ghafoor, this infused a new spirit of *Jihad*. Abdul Ghafoor was their spiritual leader so, they were enthusiastic to fight under his command. Abdul Ghafoor declared *Jihad* against the British, and the people came out for *Jihad* and fought with great zeal. The people put their turbans in the barrels of the cannons as they had no arms to fight against the British (Aamir 2009, 409).

The British camp was deeply shocked when they learnt that the commander of Mujahidin, Maulana Abdullah, Syed Mubarak Shah, Isa Khan and Abdul Ghafoor all had united to fight against the British (Mahar 1986, 337). After reaching the battlefield Abdul Ghafoor stayed at a place, where now a mosque, known as ‘Babaji Jumat’, has been built (Mahar 1986, 338). The British troops attacked the Mujahidin on 27th October, 1863, but they were forced to retreat because the Mujahidin were reinforced by new arrival of 1400 men from Swat. The Mujahidin attacked the Crag post on the night between 29th and 30th October and pushed back the British army inflicting heavy losses on them. Among the British troops 29 were killed and 92 were wounded. The post fell into the Mujahidin on 30th October. However, Major Keyes recaptured the post with the help of the 1st Punjab Infantry and a contingent of the Guides (Mahar 1986, 338).

Nothing significant occurred between 31st October and 5th November. On 6th November, 1863, Major G.W Harding attacked on the Mujahidin. A fierce battle was fought in which a large number of British soldiers were killed. The Mujahidin also suffered losses and the leader of Mada Khel was martyred. On 9th November, 1863, a *Lashkar* from Bajaur under the leadership of Zaman Khan, son of Fatehullah Khan joined the Mujahidin which deeply struck and demoralized the British Government (Frontier and Overseas Expeditions from India 1982, 248)

General Chamberlain was wounded in the battle on 20th November. The military power of the British Army increased with the arrival of General Gravik in the battlefield on 15th December, 1863. General Gravik attacked on the village Lalu in district Buner with heavy artillery. As Mujahidin were not prepared for this attack so, they were unable to face the British troops.

However, the Mujahidin presented tough resistance to the British forces and fought gallantly for the defense of their land (Sabir 1986, 625). The British expected that the Ambela expedition will come to an end up to the mid of November. But the unity of the tribesmen prolonged the war and the British accepted that defeating the Pukhtuns is not an easy task (Khan 2016, 69). On 16th December, 1863, the British forces advanced and entered into the village of Ambela and fired the village. Seeing the village of Ambela in flames, the Mujahidin attacked on the British forces and killed 128 British Soldiers (Frontier and Overseas Expeditions from India 1982, 249).

The British army was now convinced that victory over Mujahidin was not an easy task. The unexpected unity of the Mujahidin prolonged the war. So, the British followed their policy of “divide and rule” and decided to give bribes to some Chiefs including the Chief of Buner, Zaidullah Khan for attaining their support. Zaidullah Khan accepted bribes from the British and agreed to co-operate with them. Zaidullah Khan along with his companions concluded a treaty with British, wherein it was agreed upon that the people of Buner will allow the British army to fire Malka and that the British army will return from Buner after accomplishing their mission (Khan 2016, 69).

After the treachery of Zaidullah Khan, the tribesmen of Dir and Bajaur withdrew from the battlefield. The *Jirga* of Buner agreed to help the British troops in the demolishing of Malka. But the Mujahidin under the command of Amir Abdullah and prince Mubarak Shah still stuck to their positions. They were waiting to attack on the British troops (Bukhari 1992, 81). On 23 December, 1863 the British General sent a message to Abdul Ghafoor requesting him to come to terms. Abdul Ghafoor accepted this offer on the condition that if the British army withdraws from Malka after burning a hut outside the village (Malka), the freedom fighters would retreat along with their companions; otherwise they would stick to their guns and give a tough time to the British army (Bukhari 1992, 81).

According to this condition, the British army went towards Malka and burnt a hut in the outskirts of the village and retreated without actually entering the village. The British fought a battle with the Mujahidin for the capture of Malka, but, on their failure, they agreed to withdraw their army from Malka, if they were allowed to burn just one hut in Malka. With this they wanted to cover up their weakness. The spirit and determination of Abdul Ghafoor compelled the British forces to return unsuccessful. As a matter of fact, the actual purpose of the British was to capture Swat. When the last soldier of the British army had left the border of Buner,

then Abdul Ghafoor moved to Saidu Sharif. This battle of Ambela is known in the history as *Ghaza-i-Buner* (Khan 1977, 72). This fight is considered the greatest fight of the British against the inhabitants of the Indian Subcontinent and the British army returned unsuccessful from Buner.

Sadullah Khan and the Uprising of 1897

After Abdul Ghafoor, another religious leader who resisted against the British imperialism was Sadullah Khan popularly known as Sartor Faqir (Sultan-i-Rome 1994, 93). He was the son of Hameed Ullah and was born in a village Rega of Buner. Information about his date of birth is not available (Spain, 1979, 67). In search of knowledge he went to Ajmir Sharif (India) and stayed here for some years. He then visited various countries of central Asia. In 1895, he came back to Buner (McMahon & Ramsay 1981, 27).

Sadullah Khan declared *jihad* against the British In 1897. He declared that the British would be expelled from Malakand and Peshawar. He visited Bajour and Buner for the purpose of gaining support of the people in his *jihad* against the British. He succeeded in gaining support of various tribes (Mills 1979, 34). He started down the valley from Landakai on 26th July 1897 along with his followers (McMahon & Ramsay 1981, 110). He declared that within eight days we will be able to expel the British army from Malakand. People from Swat, Buner and distant areas joined him as he proceeded.

He divided his army into two parties. One party had to attack on the British forces at Malakand while another party had to attack on the British forces at Chakdara. In the beginning the British did not take this issue serious, but very soon the British felt the gravity of the situation and ordered the army to prepare for any kind of situation every time (McMahon & Ramsay 1981, 111).

When Major Deane came to know that the tribesmen are going to attack on Malakand, he sent troops for stopping their advance. The tribesmen compelled the British troops to retreat and captured a post at Serai from the British troops. The followers of Sadullah Khan snatched a huge quantity of ammunition from the British troops. Due to the severity of the situation Major Deane called the Guides from Mardan. On 27th July the Guides arrived from Mardan and confronted with the tribesmen. The tribesmen were prevented on other places except at Serai. On 28th July the 24th Punjab Infantry attacked on the tribesmen. However, the tribesmen repulsed the British forces and occupied all important positions. The number of tribesmen on

the first night were 1000 men and increased to some 12000 men at Malakand and to 8000 men at Chakdara. On the night of 29th July, the tribesmen once again attacked on the British forces. On 30th July, the tribesmen disconnected the wire between Malakand and Dargai and put fire to the levy posts. On the night of 31st July, the tribesmen made another attack. On 1st August, the tribesmen attacked on the British positions. However, the British forces succeeded to relieve Malakand on 1st August (Mills 1979, 62).

The followers of Sadullah Khan like Malakand also attacked on Chakdara on the night of 27th July. They tried their best to capture the British posts but did not succeed. On 28th July, the tribesmen once again attacked on the British forces at Chakdara and surrounded the fort on all sides. They fought gallantly but were repulsed. On 29th July, they made a strenuous attack and in spite of very heavy fire from the British army they succeeded in reaching the doorway, and attempted to put it to fire. The tribesmen attacked several times on the British forces from the 30th July to 1st August, but the relief forces reached for the help of the British forces from Malakand and relieved Chakdara on August 2nd. Thus the tribesmen fought with the British forces for a week. However, the tribesmen discouraged at the failure of their attempts to defeat and overthrow the British army from this region (Spain, 1979, 67).

Sadullah Khan and his followers left, leaving behind them dead of their own and of the British. Sadullah Khan failed to defeat the British not because of lack of bravery or courage, but because of lack of planning and the British supremacy in weapons, ammunition, communication system and well trained army (Sultan-i-Rome 2013, 171). The people of Swat fought gallantly against the British under the command of Sadullah Khan but did not succeed in defeating the British. Though he was unable to oust the British from Malakand, his struggle created the spirit for freedom among the Pukhtuns of this region (Sultan-i-Rome 2008, 27).

Conclusion

On the basis of the above facts, it can be concluded that religious leaders always have been a focal point of resistance against external aggressions. They exerted significant influence in the society due to which they succeeded in uniting the tribal elders against the British and changing the fate of the people of this area. The first confrontation of the British with the people of Swat occurred at Ambela in 1863. When the British decided to abolish the center of Mujahidin in Malka, a religious leader Abdul Ghafoor united the people of Swat and stopped the British advance in the region. After Abdul Ghafoor another religious leader who resisted against the

British was Sadullah Khan. In 1897, he started a struggle for expelling the British from Malakand. Although he did not succeed in his mission but created the spirit of freedom in the Pukhtuns of this region.

References

Aamir, Muhammad Usman. 2009. *Fizan-i-Qadria*. Peshawar: Al Hajj Abdur Rashid Babaje Sahib.

Adye, John. 1867. *Sithana: A Mountain Campaign on the Borders of Afghanistan in 1863*. London: Richard Bentley.

Ahmad, Ishtiaq. 2018. *Pakhtun Resistance Against The British Rule: An Assessment of the Frontier Uprising of 1897*. PhD thesis. Department of History, University of Peshawar.

Asar, Abdul Halim. 1966. *Rohani Rabita au Rohani Tarun* Bajawar: DarulIshaat.

Balala, Abdul Qayyum. 2000. *The Charming Swat*. Lahore:Maqsood Publishers.

Barth, Frederik. 1959. Political leadership among Swat Pathans. London: Athlone Press.

Bangash, Kamran. 2011. “British Frontier Wars: Nasty Not Nice: The Umbeyla Campaign (1863), A Critical Appraisal” *Central Asia,*

Journal of Area Study Centre (Russia, China & Central Asia) University of Peshawar. 68, 41-72

Bangash, Kamran. 2015. Frontier wars during the British Rule in India: (1849-1898): Critical Appraisal,” *Journal of thPakistan Historical Society (Historicus)*. 2

Begum, Haizal. 1992. *The Akhund of Swat: Abdul Ghafoor (A Biographical Sketch)*. MA thesis Pakistan Study Centre University of Peshawar.

Caroe, Olaf. 1984. *ThePathan*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.

File. No. 1977, B. No. 18. Tribal Affairs Research Cell Peshawar

Frontier and Overseas Expeditions from India, Selection from Government Record, Volume-1, 2nd ed. Quetta: Nisa Traders, 1982.

Hay, W.R. 1934. *Monograph on Swat State*. Simla: Government of India Press.

Khan, Muhammad Asif. 2016. *Tarikh Riyasat-e-Swat wa Sawaanah Hayat Bani Riyasat-e-Swat Miangul Abdul Wadood* (Urdu). Mingora: Shoaib Sons Publishers.

Mahar, Maulana Ghulam Rasool. (n.d). *Sarguzasht-i-Mujahidin*. Lahore: Shikh Ghulam Ali and Sons.

McMahon, A.H. and Ramsay, A.D.G. 1981. *Report on the Tribes of Dir, Swat and Bajaur together with the Utmankhel and Sam Ranizai*. Peshawar: Saeed Book Bank.

Mills, H. Woosnam. 1979. *The Pathan Revolts in North West India*. Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications.

Nevill, Captain H.L. 1977. *Campaigns on the North-West Frontier* Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications.

Nasar, Nasrullah Khan. 1950. *Akhun Sahib Swat*. Peshawar: Manzoor-e- Aaam Press.

Qadria, Muhammad Abbas. 1977. *Sufian, Darvishan au Ghazian*. Peshawar: University Book Agency.

Qadri, Muhammad Ameer Shah. 1963. *Tarikh-i-Ulema wa Mashaikh-e- Sarhad*. Peshawar: Azeem, Publishing House.

Qasmi, Syed Abdul Ghafoor. (n.d). Peshawar: Hamidia Press.

Rafi, Habib Ullah. 1977. *Da Pukhtoonkhwa Har-o-Bahar*. Afghanistan: PukhtoTolana.

Sabir, Muhammad Shafi. 1986. *Tarikh-i-Suba Sarhad*. Peshawar: University Book Agency.

Sultan-i-Rome. 2009. *Swat A Critical Analysis. IPCS Research Papers.18,3*.

Sultan-i-Rome. 1992. *Abdul Ghaffur (Akhund), Saidu Baba of Swat: life, Career and Role. Journal of The Pakistan Historical Society* (Karachi). 40, 299-308. <http://www.swatvalley.net>.

Sultan-i-Rome, 2013. *The North-West Frontier (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa): Essays on History*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.

Spain, James. W. 1979. *The way of the Pathans*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.