

## Geographical Factors in the History of the North West Frontier: An Analysis of settlement, political and socio-cultural patterns

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### Abstract

*The North West Frontier (NWF) of Pakistan, renamed Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) since 2010, has been gifted with diverse and unique geographical features. The rugged terrain, mountain passes and strategic location of the region at the crossroads of Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East are its distinguished and unrivalled geographical patterns. This aspect has shaped largely its rich and complex history. These factors have greatly influenced the movements of armies, traders, and empires for centuries. This article explores how its geographical factors such as the strategic location, passes, and mountains have impacted the settlement, political and socio-cultural patterns of the region. By examining the interplay between geography and history, this article sheds light on the geostrategic, settlement, socio-cultural, and political developments in the history of the NWF. It highlights the lasting significance of the geographical factors in shaping the destiny of the people of the NWF.*

**Key words:** Geographical features, historical developments, the North West Frontier,

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## Introduction

Looking from broader perspective the North West Frontier (NWF)<sup>1</sup> is situated at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Geographically the area of convergence of the ranges of Tian Shan, Kunlun, Karakorum, Hindukush and the Pamir systems is called the Pamir Knot and Boom-i-Dunya or roof of the world (McCall, 2007). Here Wakhan of Afghanistan, Chitral of Pakistan and the little Pamir region of Central Asia are connected through the passes of Hindukush. This mountainous region along with its passes are geographical entities of the NWF but shrouded in history. The Himalayas, the Karakorum and the Hindukush (collectively called as HKH region) along with their passes have been dictating the activities of men since time immemorial. Historically the Northern Areas of the NWF have linked sub-continent with Central Asian States in terms of civilization and trades. Different river basin valleys, mountains, glaciers and passes, all crisscrossing each other, are converged here. Such physical diversity has developed heterogeneous characteristics in the residents of the area. This has resulted in the evolution of various settlement, socio-cultural, religio-political, migratory and geostrategic patterns.

Sandwiched between Durand Line and the Punjab, the NWF is comprised of ex-Federally Administered Tribal Area and the settled districts of Khyber PakhtunKhwa (Mathews, n.d). From north to south, the Federally Administrated Tribal Area (FATA)<sup>2</sup> and Khyber PakhtunKhwa (KP) regions run along the western bank of the Indus River. Most of the Pashtun communities reside in the west of the Indus, from Kohistan in northern mountainous belt down to the plains of Dera Ismail Khan (DIK) in south. Near the river, the land is fertile, gradually turns into arid hills and

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<sup>1</sup>Located on the north-west part of the sub-continent, British gave it the name of the North West Frontier. Historically it had different names such as Gandhara, Bagram, and Pushkalawati and several others. During the reign of Cyrus of Achaemenids this region was called Gandhara. There were sub-regional names such as Malakand, Peshawar, Mardan, Kohat, Bannu, Hazara etc within the area. It was the part of the Punjab before 1901. In 2010 the name NWFP was replaced with Khyber PakhtunKhwa. In this study the word NWF will be used to cover its historical significance.

<sup>2</sup>Now the region has been merged with the settled districts of the KP.

perched plains as moving in western and south western directions. It presents a marked contrast view with changing greenery in the north as Swat valley down to Karak, Laki Marwat and DIK resembling Gobi desert (Siddique, 2014).

The northern parts of the Frontier look like an overhanging convex roof. Its base stretches roughly from Babusar pass in the east to Dorah Pass in the west. In this part of the NWF there are scores of peaks with elevation of more than 20000 feet, including Tirich Mir (25,426 ft.) near Chitral City. This part is equally important with a relatively low base levels of the river valleys and the systematic arrangement of drainage lines. Kunhar river in the east is the starting line, flowing in the south-west and ‘extending westward in an almost perfect parallel pattern spaced approximately 30 miles apart are the Indus, Swat, Panjkora, and Chitral Rivers in that order.’ In this part of the NWF the Hindukush range, with its jagged peaks, precipitous slopes and extremely meagre forest, presents one of the most ‘formidable land barriers in the world’ (Ditcher, 1967, p. 8).

The NWF serves as transitional area both culturally and climatically. Culturally the region divides the Indian subcontinent from Iranian plateau. Regarding climate, the region can be assessed on the basis of winter and summer average rainfall, between the ‘areas subject to the south-west monsoon and those in which winter precipitation predominates.’ It plays the role of the transitional zone wherein the ‘south-west monsoon and winter cyclonic depression of western origin’ compete with each other. The region is the ‘important giver of effective moisture’ of the Asian continent. Due to its location it receives enough moistures and warmness from both sources but creates climatic uncertainty. The intermediate position of the NWF between the sub-continent and the Iranian plateau serves as a land-bridge between the basic Mediterranean and monsoon types of climate (Ditcher, 1967).

The location of the NWF along with its easier passes in its eastern part have turned this region into the route of invaders, traders and pilgrims. Since ancient time it served as a gate of Indo-Pak, (Bahadar Shah, 1999) and the place of civilizational fusion and collisions. Throughout history its role as marchland remained its identity (Spain, 1985). Being the only ‘practicable landing place’ and ‘one vulnerable spot’ (Andrew, 1888, p. 2) of the Indo-Pak, the NWF has experienced successive waves of intruders such as Persians, Greeks, Bactrians, Scythians, Kushans, White Huns, Arabs, Turks, Mughals (Banarjee, 2000) and British. Except the last, all others have come down through the passes of the tribal belt in the eastern side of the NWF. All these different people with separate socio-cultural values and traditions have remained in this region for some times in its history. Diverse landscape of the area had developed different habitats for the intruders. It resulted in the development of various tribal based settlement and socio-political systems. Gradually this diversity has greatly influenced its tumultuous history, marked by tribal conflicts, repeated invasions, rising and falling of empires and dynasties.

The region’s geography has played a significant role in shaping the movements of people, the formation of borders, and the development of trade and cultural exchange networks. From the ancient Silk Road to the modern-day conflicts, the NWF’s geography has remained a constant influencing factor in the course of history in multiple ways. Historically the passes and gates in the NWF have seen frequent migrations and invasions to India from Central Asia and the West but the reverse was as well (Sultan-E-Rome, 2013). People have been through the passes of the Hindukush as migrants, refugees, invaders, merchants, missionaries, and pilgrims (Toynbee, 1961). The cross border communication with the Tarim basin through the passes of the eastern Hindukush has also been in vogue since long ago. These migrated people have settled in the isolated hilly environment in the Trans Himalayan region (Dani, 1983). Different mountains and

hills have apportioned different areas of the northern and north-western parts of the NWF into smaller isolated regions. The uniform cultural flow was not possible in this rugged terrain. These isolated smaller sub valleys reflect divided and individualized human life. Such terrain sets in motion the development of sub regional languages and regionalized cultural patterns. These local conditions have mainly contributed to the socio-cultural and political dynamics of the people of the NWF and specifically of those in its northern parts (Dani, 1989). Thus the Frontier region has served as ‘the site for a continual cultural flow’ (Ditcher, 1967, p. 3).

The NWF was home to Indus valley and Gandhara valley civilizations. It had connection with Tarim basin, and Oxus basin valleys.<sup>3</sup> Being part of the Silk route the region has served as route of Buddhist pilgrims, explorers and travelers. A number of connecting lines with the Silk routes would radiate from this region. In prehistoric era, there was Indus civilization trading outposts at Shartugai beyond the Hindukush in Afghanistan. There are strong similarities in the cultural materials of Namazga sites and the Oxus valley sites in northern Afghanistan with that of the Indus. This justifies that there was an incessant outflow of cultural traditions from the Indus to southern Turkmania (Tahir, 2008). The Northern Areas of the NWF form the upper Indus valley. The high hills have apportioned it into smaller sub regions centering on the world of the river valley, reflecting divided and individualized human life. The connection of the Northern Areas of the Indus valley to Turkistan has remained intact and this northern route has weaved the upper Indus valley with Central Asia and China that have resulted in the overall cultural impacts over the whole region.

Language as an identity of its people, is also subject to the impact of geographical features. Different kinds of languages within very restricted area in the northern parts of the NWF are due

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<sup>3</sup>Unpublished M.Phil thesis by Farmanullah, *Historical significance of the passes of the Hindukush: A case study of Baroghil pass*, xiii.

to the high mountainous terrain with deep isolated valleys inhabited by different people with less interaction with each other. There are dozens of languages in northern parts of the NWF spoken by different ethnic groups. Some are main languages, equally spoken or at least understood by all. Shina is spoken in lower parts of Nagir, whereas Burushaski is also well understood. Burushaski is neither related to Indian or Iranian family of languages. It is likely to be left by the invaders in past. In its stock of words it shows no resemblance to the Turkic dialects, and is closely allied to the Warshki tongue spoken in the northern valleys of Yasin (Stein, 1904). Under Ruhlen classification there are ten languages phyla in Asia. Three of them are Sino-Tibetan, Indo-European and Dravidian. Burushaski, the language of Hunza, does not come under any Phylum and itself is an isolated language (Cavalli-Sforza, 1994). The survival of such unique language is mainly to the preserving effects of the geographical features. Rugged terrain with harsh climatic environment keep the interaction of different ethnicities less. This results in the purity of civilization. Some unique geographical features of the NWF reflect its peculiar impacts on its history.

### **Geostrategic Location of the NWF**

For centuries some of Pashtun tribes are living in the Frontier tribal belt lying between the NWF and Afghanistan. They have preserved their independent identity free from any outside political domination due to their peculiar historical and physical circumstances. These tribes mainly rely on the ‘inaccessibility of their country.’ Throughout history this geostrategic significance has enabled them to defy all those who have tried to ‘dislodge them from their strategic position’ abutting the ‘natural gateways’ between Central Asia and the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent (Ditcher, 1967).

The environment of the NWF is very harsh. The detailed knowledge of the region and its resources are very important but Pashtuns lack the necessary technical knowledge about their habitat to cope

with environmental challenges (Ditcher, 1967). The region is one of those few areas of the world which has served as a transitional zone between peoples and cultures. It is situated between the highland massif of Central Asia and the plains of India. The Hindukush system separates these two regions, only link through many important passes. Armies have been attracted to control or conquer Central Asia and Northern India whenever masses were not able to move through the passes of Frontier. The history of the Frontier is clearly observable in the language, customs, and features of Pashtuns. The influence of physical environment on human culture is reflected on the Frontier tribesmen. The habitats of Pashtuns offer little resources. Its inhabitants would exact tolls from Great Powers who would wish to pass through the region safely. Due to the craggy wilderness of the Frontier Mountains, its people have remained free of the troublesome external authority of social institutions. Such instance is almost ‘unprecedented in the history of either the eastern or western world’ (Ditcher, 1967, p. 3).

Previously there were research mainly on the geostrategic significance of the Frontier due to its role as the ‘guardian of the most accessible overland routes into the Indian subcontinent from Central and south-west Asia.’ Due to the technological advancement Frontier’s former locational importance has lessened sharply. The former glory and economic advantages had been the driving cause in the growth of the Frontier population. The region once had been an ‘asset for profitable guerrilla operations.’ This ‘inhospitable hilly surroundings’ would serve as ‘cover and concealment from enemy fire’ (Ditcher, 1967, p. 4). Now the former glory seems blinker but still its geostrategic significance remains. In the war of terror the NWF and its tribal region is in the limelight of international politics.

The NWF has far greater significance in the international politics. People of the Frontier has been forced to ‘adopt a much more realistic approach to their physical surroundings’ but it does not

mean that the ‘tribesmen have become any more docile or the Frontier itself less potentially explosive.’ First the tribal belt has been independent in many ways from the central government of Pakistan (now it has become the part of KP since 2018) and secondly the issue of Pashtunistan persists due to the non-recognition of its border, the Durand line (Ditcher, 1967).

### **Communication Arteries and Capillary Routes**

In the opening lines of *The Routes of Man*, Ted Conover expresses his view that “every road is a story of striving: for profit, for victory in battle, for discovery and adventure, for survival and growth, or simply for livability” (Conover, 2010, p. 1). The same way may be applicable on the NWF. The significant communicating lines of the region hold fascinating stories. These arteries connect different parts of the NWF with different passes and with the regions beyond its borders. This region was connected with the Old Silk routes. The old silk route would lead to Yarkand and onward the route would run parallel with river Yarkhun, leading to Karakoram pass, traversing Ladakh, touching Siachan’s eastern side to Zojila pass and Kashmir. Another route from Yarkand following Shimsal pass, down to Hunza and Gilgit would lead to Taxila. Three routes would radiate from Kashghar. One was leading to Tashkurgan, and through Mastuj valley leading to Chitral, Bajaur, Swat and Peshawar. This road from Mastuj leads to Darkot pass and further onward to Yasin and Gilgit (Dani, 1996). The easiest route is from Kabul and then to Tirmiz or through Kunduz to Badakhshan and via Oxus river into Tajikistan. Another route is from Kunar to Badakhshan and then to Kulab (old Khutlan). Syed Ali Hamdani had followed this route. Babur had taken Shibir pass road to Kabul. Amir Timor had adopted Miamian route to Herat and Kabul. Alexander followed Shibir pass to Bagram and reached to Kunar valley and via Nawa pass to Bajaur and onward to Swat. Hieuen Tsung, a Chinese Pilgrim, took northern road to Samarkand, Bokhara and came to Tirmiz, and at last to Peshawar via Bagram. Sung Yun, another Chinese



pilgrim, walked down via Baroghil pass into Darell valley and then to Peshawar, and at last to Taxila (Dani, 1996).

Between the administered border and Durand Line the mountainous chain forms first part of the Pashtuns tribal belt. Through this belt seven famous passes would link India with Central Asia for the purpose of trade or invasion since long ago. These include Khyber, Malakand, Gandab in Mohmands, Bangash or Paiwar via Kurram, Gomel and Tochi passes in the country of Waziristan, and Bolan through Quetta. The local tribal caravans used it regularly, but for international traffic are usually closed. Although Mohmand, Tochi and Bangash passes are not located on Afghan Frontier (Caroe, 1958) but are linkages with the border region. These passes 'figure in history as corridors of invasion and commerce between the Indus plains and central Asia' (Caroe, 1958, pp. xvii-xviii). Four of these passes are commanded by four different valleys. Peshawar commands Khyber Pass and Kurram pass goes through Kohat. Bannu and Dera Ismail Khan control Tochi and Gomel respectively (Pennel, 2002).

Khyber Pass, the most important, is shaped by the last spurs of Sufaid Koh. Here the Sufaid Koh submerges into Kabul river valley.<sup>4</sup> The Pass is dubbed as 'the treacherous route to Peshawar' (Tanner, , p.4) due to the fact that it has been adopted by the Central Asian invaders throughout history. Passes of eastern Hindukush linking Chitral with Wakhan are Broghil, Darwaza, Kan Khun, Sad Ishteragh, Khatiza, Nuksan, Agram and Dorah. Baroghil is the easiest and lowest in altitude out of the thirteen passes in the eastern Hindukush (Faizi, 1996). Regarding the strategic significance of the passes of eastern Hindukush British strategists believed that 'the vital point in the defenses of India in this quarter lies near Charikar to the north of Kabul where the chain thins out and three practicable passes debouch on the valley of Kabul River' (Doui, 2009, p. 27).

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<sup>4</sup>Imperial Gazetteer, provincial series, *NWFP*, 227.

## Settlement Patterns

There are ethnic variations in the inhabitants of the NWF. Majority are Pashtuns but other ethnicities are also residing in its different parts. Pashtuns are further subdivided into number of tribes and clans, each settled in different areas bearing their ethnic identities. Two main divisions of settlements are the tribal belt and the settled districts, further divided into separate ethnic zones. The most important of these include Chitral, Dir, Peshawar, Kohat, Bannu, Hazara, in the settled regions whereas Waziristan, Bajaur, Mohmand, Khyber, Kurrum and Orakzai in the tribal belt.

Caroe has given the references of Strabo and Arrian that Aspaii tribe may have been Yousafzais in the time of Alexander who straddled the border of Kunar and Bajaur. Assaceni occupied the areas of Bazira, Massaga and Ora, present-day Talash and Swat valleys. Aspaii of Bajaur and Kunar had great similarities with Asaceni of Swat in nomenclature (Caroe, 1958).

Most of the Pashtuns on the eastern side of Durand line trace back themselves to Ghoria Khel and Khakhe Khel living in the country of Qandahar and its adjacent areas. They migrated to the eastern side of Durand Line between 1480 and 1520 AD. Khakhe Khel came to Peshawar via Khyber Pass. They met with the assembly of elders of Dalazaks at Spirsung. Khakhe Khel was happily awarded Doaba near Peshawar. On the request of Malik Ahmad, Dalazaks agreed to adjust other emigrants from Afghanistan. Slowly Khakhe Khel, ancestors of Yousafzais, started encroachment in Hashtnagar and Bajaur. Dalazaks fell out with them, but were defeated and further more territory beyond Charsada and Mardan were occupied by Khakhe Khel.<sup>5</sup>

About the last quarter of the 7<sup>th</sup> or the first quarter of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, Bangash, Orakzai, Afridis and Shinwaris had forced a Hindu Raja of Lahore to cede the hills south of river Kabul and west

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<sup>5</sup>Mohammad Umer Rund Miankhel, *Da Narhi aw Bashar ta land katana, Pukhtanu Qabailo shajari aw Maini, Pashtu*

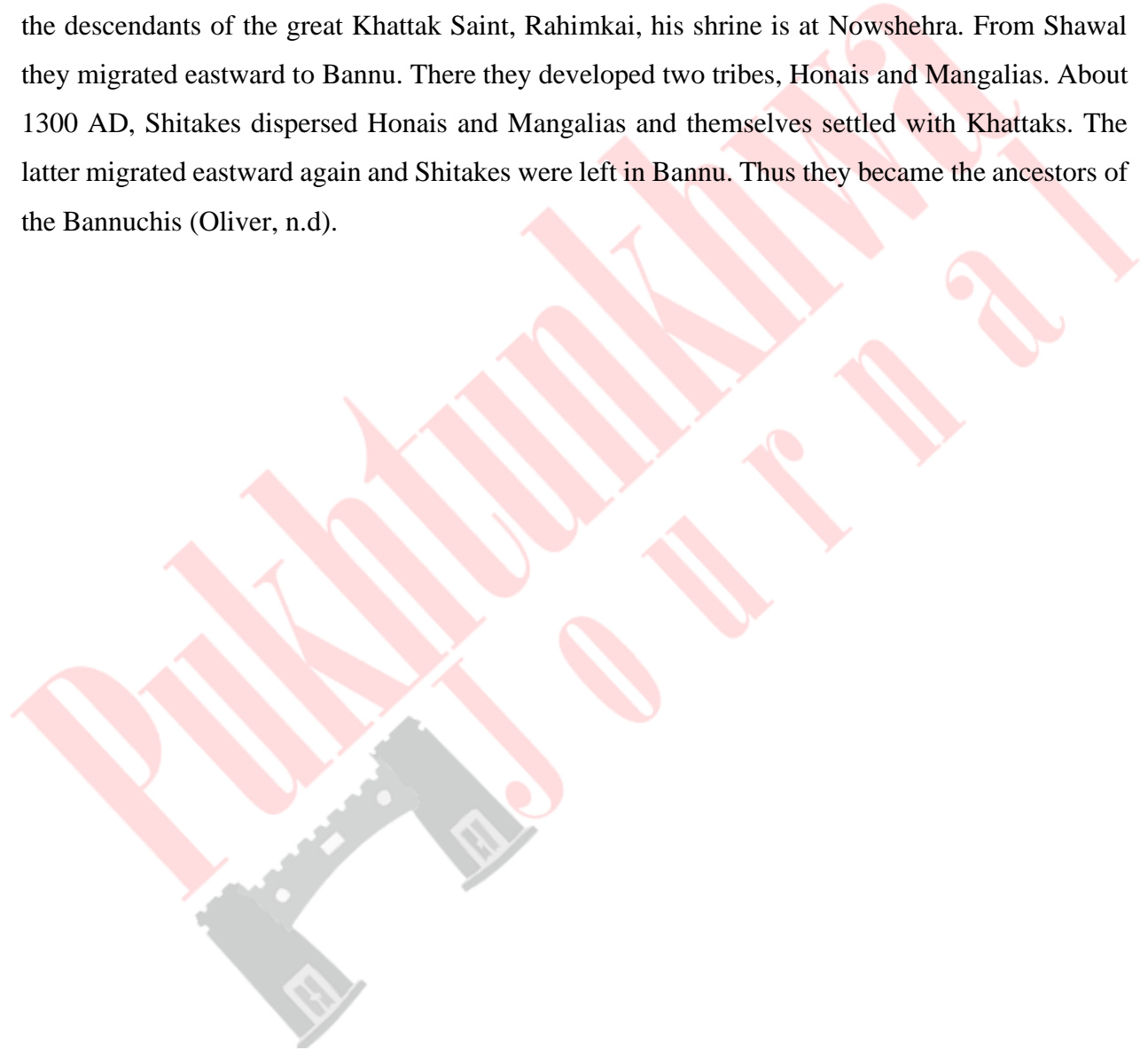
(Maiwand: Khapar Nadvia Tolana, 1383 Lamrez (solar calendar), 208-11.

of the Indus. This was their first appearance. These Pashtuns likely from Ghor along with Ghakkars from salt Range were to guard the then frontiers. These tribes then held Peshawar valley and hills. Sultan Mahmud Ghazni took Peshawar after defeating Jaipal 1001 AD and his son Anandpal in 1008. This served as supply base for subsequent invasions. Dalazaks, doubtful Pashtuns, were the first to settle in the valley during this time. Meanwhile two tribes Khakhe Khels and Ghoria Khels were then residing in Kabul. Khakhe Khel had further divided into Yousafzais, Gigianis and Tarklanris. They then crossed into Peshawar plain through Tartara route. They soon fell into an open war with Dalazaks. The battle was fought on river Swat, routing Dalazaks. Many of them fled across the Indus. Hashtnagar was given to Mohammadzais. Yousafzais with their Mandan brother occupied northern parts of river Kabul still bearing the relics of the bygone people. Near river Swat Usman Khel obtained land. Tarklanris partly remained in Laghman and partly settled in Bajaur. Yousafzais took the areas from Swatis by controlling the lower valley. At the close of 15<sup>th</sup> century, they occupied Buner and Chamla. After a century, the tribes split up into two divisions. First bore the same name, Yousafzais while the second, Mandan, after the name of Yousafzai's nephew. Yousafzais were spreading over Dir, Swat, Buner and the upper Indus hills, while Mandanzai started inhabiting Yousafzais plain and the areas between Buner and the Indus. Almost the whole area between river swat and the Indus was occupied by Yousafzais. Swatis were forced to Hazara. Following their friends, Ghoria Khel swelled in, subsequently divided into Mohmands, Khalils and Daudzais. They also came down from Afghanistan settled in Basaul, Jalalabad and Laghman. Mohmands started inhabitation the hills between Lalpura and Peshawar. In 1505, Babur ventured the Frontier from Khyber Pass to Peshawar moving along the border, going back to Ghazni through Bori valley and Sakhi Sarwar pass. During this period the Pashtuns had completely occupied the areas of Laghman, Kunar, Peshawar, Swat and Bajaur. For next 25

years Babur led many expeditions to bring the Pathans to terms, but failed. With the guidance of Dalazaks, he occupied the fortress of Bajaur and extended the power of Tarklanris. In order to tame Yousafzais, Babur married Bibi Mubaraka. Babur's son, Kamran took shelter with Ghoria Khel at Pashat on the Kunar River and his brother, Hamayun pursued him and chastised the sheltering tribes. About 1554, Daudzais, Khalils and Mohmands established themselves in the area of Dalazaks. Different clans of Mohmands settled in different parts of KP. Daudzais established themselves as far as Akbar Pura, whereas Khalils from Michini, southwards along Khyber range to Peshawar started inhabiting. Most of Dalazaks were driven across the Indus. Khattaks began to inhabit south and east of Kohat district. Originally northern slopes of Suleiman range was their abode. About 13<sup>th</sup> century, they started moving gradually eastwards towards Bannu and Kohat. At the closing of 15<sup>th</sup> century they had brought most of Kohat under their way from Bangash. On the horizon of the valley of Peshawar they appeared in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Akbar the Great had given the plain from Khairabad to Nowshehra to their tribal chief, Malik Akora at the expense of the services granted to the king. Gradually they encroached upon the areas of their neighbors, Mohmands, Khalils and Mandan. With the passage of time they divided into two main branches, one at Akora on the bank of river Kabul and the other at Teri in south-west Kohat. Akbar tried to tame the Pathans, but never succeeded completely. The Yousafzais cut to Pieces Bir Bal and his army. Toder Mal and Man Singh only kept them aloof from the main city. Akbar's successor gave them more space for freedom. Aurangzeb made peace with them, mostly in favor of the Pathans. Durrans and Sikhs extended their way only in terms not in reality (Oliver, n.d).

Habitat of Khattaks is the most 'desolate and unblessed on the entire frontier.' During the British period, they were better known as the salt carriers than agriculturists. They are the far most quarrelling tribe with their neighbors. In Kohat district they had the most severely contested battle

with Bangash and with Niazis of Isakhel. They had many a murderous combat with Wazirs, while Marwats are their hereditary enemies. With Afridis, they have fought thrice. They had bitter enmity with Yousafzais. The battle of Misri Banda cost great leaders on both sides. British had changed everything and Khattaks had no feud with anyone. In 19<sup>th</sup> century, they were busy with their earnings. The youths have served under British army. Kaka Khel tribe is held with reverence, being the descendants of the great Khattak Saint, Rahimkai, his shrine is at Nowshehra. From Shawal they migrated eastward to Bannu. There they developed two tribes, Honais and Mangalias. About 1300 AD, Shitakes dispersed Honais and Mangalias and themselves settled with Khattaks. The latter migrated eastward again and Shitakes were left in Bannu. Thus they became the ancestors of the Bannuchis (Oliver, n.d).



## Conclusion

Due to its unique geographical features the North West Frontier region has played a significant role in its history. The rugged terrain, mountains, strategic passes, different river valleys, plains and deeper valleys have influenced the movement of people, cultures, and empires. Climatic variation has developed different socio-cultural values in its residents. Having an important geostrategic location, the NWF is situated at the crossroads of civilizations and the marchland of invaders. If observed in broader perspective, the region has been a hub for trade, cultural exchange, and imperial ambitions due to the region's strategic location at the crossroads of Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East. Many important passes numbering more than hundred including the crucial Khyber, Bolan, Nawa passes have been the key entry points for invaders and traders that greatly influenced the region's political and economic history. The Indus River valley has been the source of sustenance and transportation, which largely contributed to the development of different civilizations including Indus valley and Gandhara and empires such as Achaemenids, Sassanids and Mughals.

The mountainous terrain of the NWF has created deeper valleys with natural barriers. This in turn has developed isolated communities which has deeply influenced the development of distinct cultures, languages and ethnicities. The economy of the inhabitants of the NWF with agriculture, trade, and nomadism emerging as primary sources of their livelihood and settlement patterns with tribal structure are largely subject to its harsh climate and geography. The region's geographical factors have also influenced its political history. The empires and dynasties in the Frontier would rise and fall based on their ability to control strategic passes, other important locations and resources. The geographical features of the NWF have developed the cultural heritage, including languages, customs, and traditions, of the inhabitants of the Frontier. To sum up the variation in

geographical features of the NWF has been the main contributor in the development of the diversity in the history of the region.



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