

## ARROGANT PRIDE IN IDENTITY & SELF-AGGRANDIZEMENT AMONG PAKHTUNS: A SYMBIOSIS

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### Abstract

Identity has always been central to ethnography and a sense of distinctiveness among members of a society and a cultural group. This is true for all ethnicities but for Pakhtuns identity has been critical not only for their cultural patterns but for their interactions with other ethnic groups and communities. Although every ethnic group takes pride in its identity but Pakhtuns have had a somewhat unmatched sense of their identity. This profound belief and pride in identity has had extensive political, economic, social and psychological consequences for the entire Pakhtun society and even Pakistan, where most Pakhtuns live. In particular this arrogant pride among Pakhtuns has always shaped their perception of superiority. This paper explores the relationship between Pakhtuns' arrogant pride in their identity and self-aggrandizement prevalent in Pakhtun society.

### Pakhtun Pride in Identity

Pakhtuns have a proud but extensively oral history that has described them belonging to the most dominant races in the history. The way people, communities and ethnic groups write and portray their past or history largely forms their identity. The indigenously written history of the genesis of Pakhtun is quite vague and therefore there is no conspicuous consensus and clarity among common Pakhtuns, scholars and historians about the origin and background of the ethnic group. It was generally observed by the researcher that Pakhtuns by and large strongly hold beliefs in their pre-Islamic origin. They feel extremely proud in declaring themselves as Bani Israel [children of Israel] (Sheikh, 2016). Pakhtuns generally narrate their story of origin in the

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manner that their embracing of Islam was associated with once Qais Abdur Rashid's bait (pledge) while holding the hands of Prophet of Islam Hazrat Muhammad (SAW). And that Pakhtuns were given the honorary name of Baithan (mast of a ship which is extremely strong) by

Prophet Muhammad (SAW), which then became Pathan with the passage of time. For almost all

the Pakhtuns their lineage, known by the suffix - Zai, (means 'sons of' in Pakhtu language) goes

to any of the four maximal descent groups, all of which originated in biological or adoptive descendants of Qais bin Abdur Rashid (Barth, 1959; Lindholm, 1982; Barfield, 2010).

Pakhtuns

proudly use the suffix zai as their surname for which the underlying reason is the feelings of strength and aggrandizement, which they derive by associating themselves with any of the sons

of Qais, hence, establishing their relationship with Israel indirectly.

Though the dominant belief among Pakhtuns (regarding their affinity and similarity with Israelites) has had its notable supporters, still this argument has many shortcomings. And there is

a fair amount of criticism on the basis of shortcomings in this belief of Pakhtuns as the children

of Israel, which was recorded first ever by Niamatullah Harvi in Makhzan-i-Afghani (Dorn, 1829). Many writers (like Kakakhail, 1981: 35; Cycks, 1973:78; Raheem, 1969:43) have termed

the above mentioned belief as merely a fairy tale, written by a Pakhtun to found a proud pedigree

for his race, while other writers believe that there is no such tradition recorded in any literature

prior to Makhzan-i-Afghani. However, Niamatullah himself admits the non-existence of any proof in historical works for his claim. According to Niamatullah, it was the ignorance of Pakhtuns living as hill men, enmeshed in poverty, therefore, knowledge could not develop among them and they could not document their organized history. Another reason to him was the

lack of royal leadership and power centre which has been a key reason for lack of extensively and systematically written history of the group.

Demystifying Roots of Pakhtun Identity

Though provided somewhat plausible rationale of Pakhtuns for not having a systemically recorded history, Niamatullah has been stringently criticized by British colonial administrator and writer, Olaf Caroe. According to Caroe (1958) Pakhtun genealogy was written by chroniclers at the court of the Mughal emperors in the early part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. These chroniclers could speak and write only Persian just to amuse the Mughal court. Even the Delhi

courtier, who had forgotten his Pakhtu, would only identify the racial appellation 'Pathan' with

an obscure Mediterranean Arab sefarer' s word to make a pun and to amuse. Niamatullah should

have known that no Afghan or speaker of Pakhtu or Pashtu ever referred to himself as a Pathan,

and that the word was of Indian origin. The corresponding word in the classical Pakhtu of the Peshawar Valley is Pakhtun, plural Pukhtanah, of which the word Pathan is a Hindi corruption.

Along with the tale of Qais, Pakhtuns, as found in the area of study of this research also justified

their lineage with Israel by identifying a number of similarities between the two races. This included Pakhtuns' rigid tribal structure, their stringent code of behavior, their strikingly Semitic

features, their bearded patriarchal appearances, and their predilection for biblical names (actually

acquired from the Holy Quran) like Adam, Ibrahim, Musa, Daud, Suleiman, Yaqub, Yousaf, Esa, and the rest, similar to those of Israelites. These similarities according to James W. Spain are merely accidental that have encouraged the belief in the idea of Pakhtuns being descendants of Israel. Niamatullah has tried to link obscure beginnings, in a manner half historical, half mythical with the great figures of the Hebrews, Kings David and Solomon and others. Therefore, in the argument linking Pakhtuns to Semitic races, the tale of the Qais is also not authentic but is based on mythical traditions. That is why it remained a favorite subject of speculation by many British soldiers, administrators and missionaries, and persisted in memoirs and travelogues well into the twentieth century. But according to Spain, the only trouble with the belief is that it was not true (Spain, 1972: 28-29).

Spain's argument is furthered by another English writer G.P Tate, who argues that this so-called genealogy of Pakhtuns was compiled under the religious influence on Pakhtuns, which has no historical evidence. He wrote in his book *The Kingdom of Afghanistan* that the origin of the tribes, which call themselves Pakhtuns, have attracted a great deal of attention, owing to the fact that they claim to be the descendants of Jews, who had settled in Ghor, and the various clans associate their origin to one of the three sons of Qais (their tribal chief), who is said to have been the 37<sup>th</sup> in descent from Saul, king of Israel. Qais was induced to visit the Prophet Muhammad (SAW), who won the Jewish Chief to Islam, and bestowed him with the name of Abdur Rashid, and the title of Pathan. This last (Pathan) is a mysterious word which cannot be traced to an origin in any known language, but it is believed to mean either or both, the rudder, or the mast of a ship. So say those who have committed the genealogy of the Pakhtuns to paper. The conversion of Qais is not mentioned in the history of Islam. The so-called genealogy of the Pakhtuns was compiled at a time when all the races of mankind were believed to have been the offspring of the first man and woman created by the Almighty (Tate, 1911:10).

Another scholar Navras Jaat Aafreedi (2009) comments that the tradition of considering Pakhtuns as the children of Israel is based on the premise that the Biblical stories are actually historical events and that the characters in these stories once were really extant. Pakhtuns in South Asia are residing in areas where there are no Jews; therefore, their claim of Israelite descent cannot be attributed to any Jewish influence, nor can it be considered as even a byproduct of Christianity. Aafreedi narrates that insistence on an Israelite origin stems from a desire on the part of Pakhtuns to distance themselves from their pre-Islamic polytheistic past. Therefore, Pakhtuns have fabricated fake genealogies in order to associate themselves to the

founders of Semitic monotheism, the supposed patriarchs, accepted by Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike. However, while strongly claiming their descent from the Biblical character Jacob

(whose alternative name is Israel), Pakhtun respondents in both the target areas of this study—

Swabi and Charsadda districts—were found to be equally antagonistic towards Jews. For the modern day Pakhtuns, Israelites are cursed according to the Quran and will not be redeemed until

they return to the original faith, Islam, which was re-established in its purest form by Prophet Muhammad (SAW). Surprisingly, Pakhtuns distinguish themselves from the Jews on the basis of

religion and territory, but still try to establish their affinity with Jews and in social discourse this

is a very important base of their ethnic identity.

Incomprehensible Association with Bani Israel & Loathing of Jews

However, despite their antagonistic attitude towards the modern day Jews, Pakhtuns still associate their unfathomable genealogical relation with them. The underlying reason behind this

dichotomy of attitudes is the inherent self-aggrandizement (termed as Vainglorious behavior by

Fredrick Barth) among Pakhtuns that has always had compelled them to talk high big of themselves and cook up stories regarding their association with the Israelites that once was greatly endeared by Almighty Allah thus remained the only race which received the most bountiful blessing of Allah. Israelites consider themselves as of pure blood and the most exalted

creature on earth. They have been the most rigid, religiously staunch, characterized by excessive

honour and pride and unforgiving of their enemies. Israelites were the people that arguably remained untamed throughout their history. Pakhtuns generally correlate their rigidness or stubbornness, adherence to religion, honour, revenge taking practices and invincibility with Israelites in order to claim a distinct position among other ethnic groups in the region.

Therefore,

Pakhtuns in the annals of history and even contemporaneously want to see themselves and want

others to see them as the ‘ chosen’ and most ‘ revered’ race or people. This is clear evidence of the

prevalence of self-aggrandizement among the Pakhtuns.

Pakhtun Identity Formation Conditioned by Self-Praising

Other arguments (revealed during empirical data collection for this research study) of Pakhtuns

origin like being Aryans or of Greek descent could also be seen in the backdrop of the prevailing

practice of excessive self-praising among Pakhtuns. The argument of Aryan origin is strongly adhered to by contemporary Pakhtuns particularly of Charsadda by citing the remnants of Gandhara civilization and other historical places that are believed to be the remnants of Aryans

in the area. While some Pakhtuns also claim their descent from soldiers left behind by Alexander the Great after his invasion of the Indian subcontinent in 327–323 BC. Alexander conquered Asia including Syria, Palestine and Mesopotamia, before subduing Persia and Egypt in Africa. He then went further and defeated Transoxania before reaching the Indus River. On his way back, while traveling to Arabia, he fell ill and died. Alexander's army consisted of over 30,000 Greek and Macedonian soldiers (Mehdi et al., 1999). Alexander the Great, wherever he went, settled new cities. In every city, which he conquered, supplanted Greek men to govern and intermarry with the local women. His empire was called the Hellenistic Empire. After his death, the empire fell into three Hellenistic kingdoms; Egypt, Bactria (the present day Afghanistan), and Macedonia-Greece. In Bactria during Alexander's stay, continued conflict was seen with the local people in regions what are known today as the FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas, now merged with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan) along the border of modern-day Afghanistan. However, many Greek and Macedonian soldiers got mixed up with some local Pakhtun tribes. Among these tribes, the Khattak and Ghilzai make suppressed claims to some kind of Greek ancestry. Genetic studies have shown a small trace of Greek ancestry among these Pakhtun tribes that confirms these historical claims (Firasat et al., 2007). Somewhat plausible evidence like mentioned above exists in history and literature about the rule of Aryans and invasion by Greek in Pakhtuns dominant areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Many writers have also sought to detect similarities in language and cultural traditions of Pakhtuns with both Aryan tribes and Greeks. But these arguments did not receive that scale of support from respondents in the field as compared to the belief of Pakhtuns' of their Israelite origin. The underlying reason for the lack of support to the Aryan as well as of Greek origin theory is manifested in the self-aggrandizement that compel Pakhtuns to believe themselves as the only non-subdued and invincible people as well as unique (in the context of their code of life). This is a widely-held belief among majority of Pakhtuns that not a single other race has ever had dominated them, and that Pakhtuns' valor have even drove British soldiers away from the North-West of Pakistan and South-Eastern areas of Afghanistan. The above-mentioned views of Pakhtuns as revealed by the respondents in the study area, about their origin loaded with the sense of self-aggrandizement are challenged by former chief minister of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province, Abdul Qaiyum (1945) in his book 'Gold and Guns on the Pathan Frontier'. He writes that Pakhtun land has always remained a pathway for invaders

throughout the long course of history. The Khyber Pass, the Gomal Pass and the Tochi Pass have remained the main pathways through which the Aryan hordes poured into India. This land has provided a pathway to the armies of Tartars, Mongols, Turks and Iranians, either to colonize or to establish empires at Delhi and beyond (Qaiyum, 1945). It would be true to say that before the advent of the European races generally, and the British in particular which landed in India through the sea, all the other invasions had been from the North-West, the Pakhtun lands. From the 9<sup>th</sup> Century onwards, each of these invaders brought with them a new religion, an entirely new social code, a different type of art and architecture, in fact an entirely new concept of life. They brought about tremendous changes in Pakhtuns' social and political system, their outlook on life, and very conceptions of values. These intruders fighting their way through the passes and the valleys of the North-West were always, in the first instance, headed towards the Indus, and the Punjab, advancing to the Jamuna and the Ganga rivers as far east as Bengal and Assam. Other waves swept past Delhi into Central India, and past into the uplands of the south, that is the Deccan, and founded kingdoms which very often lasted for centuries. They penetrated even to the far distant south. Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam have in turn claimed spiritual allegiance from these fighting men of the North. The remains of numerous Buddhist stupas and monasteries scattered all over this area bear testimony to the spiritual hold which the religion of the great Gautama once enjoyed over the entire region. These remnants thus, negate the dominant belief of Pakhtuns as being pristine Muslims. In the fifth century B.C. Darius, the Persian Monarch, invaded and conquered the areas round Kabul and Indus. Two centuries later the same hills and valleys witnessed the armies of Alexander treading their way through to the Jhelum and beyond. Alexander came through Herat and overran the valleys and plains on the Afghan side of the Oxus. He marched on Kabul. The Khyber was then, as it is even now, held by that warlike clan of Aparoetae as the Greeks called them, and whom we now call the Afridis. Avoiding the Khyber Pass, Alexander crossed the Kabul River near Jalalabad and by way of the Konar Valley entered the Yousafzai Plain that is, Swat State and the Malakand Agency. The next landmark in the land of Pakhtuns was the advent of the great Ashoka. He carried the confines of



his kingdom to the river Krishna in the south, and the borders of Bactria in the North, about 267

B.C. This was the time when Buddhism was on the rise and held sway, spiritually as well as sequentially, over the North-West Pakistan and Afghanistan. Numerous ruins of Buddhist monasteries, Stupas and even settlements can be witnessed from the Indus right up to the Hindu

Kush. Chinese Buddhist pilgrims came to pay their homage at Buddhist shrines, particularly at

the shrine containing the ashes of the Buddha in the Kanishka Stupa outside Peshawar.

Muslims Arrival in Indian Subcontinent and Pakhtuns Identity Transformation

Tartars, Aryans, Hindus and Buddhists struggled for a long period of history to gain supremacy

over Afghanistan and the North-West Pakistan. However, the Frontier tract remained dominated

either by Hindus or Buddhists till the seventh century A.D. The new faith of Islam was brought

to Sindh province (Pakistan) in A.D. 711 by Mohammad Bin Qasim. Soon after, the present Afghanistan and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan were converted to Islam, and there followed a series of invasions of Hindustan which completely altered the history of Indian

subcontinent. By A.D. 977 Subaktagin, the Turkish slave king of Balkh and Ghazni, initiated a

series of invasions of India. Thereafter followed Mahmud of Ghazni and a succession of invading warlords from the north overrunning the whole of India, and founded dynasties that ruled India for centuries. In the year 1526 Zaheer Uddin Babar crossed the Indus and while marching to Delhi, defeated the armies of Ibrahim Lodi and founded the Mughal Dynasty, which

ruled India till the British brought the Mughal suzerainty to an end in 1850 to become masters of India.

The strong Mughal Empire right up to the death of Emperor Aurangzeb comprised of the North-

West Frontier of Pakistan, Afghanistan and India constituting one single Empire. After the death

of Aurangzeb, the Mughal hold over Afghanistan and the Frontier became weaker till the Northern Provinces were wrested from them by powerful war lords who carved out Empires for

themselves in the North-West. Among these was a shepherd boy of Turkish origin named Nadir

Shah<sup>4</sup>, who had already seized the Persian throne. Strong and powerful Nadir Shah soon overran

Afghanistan, marching to Delhi and while returning to Persia, he forced the helpless Mughal Emperor Nasir-ud-din Muhammad Shah to cede vast territories in the north-west to his kingdom.

Sindh, Multan, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province and several districts of the Punjab province

near the Indus River were torn off from India and henceforth formed part of Nadir Shah's Persian

Empire. Upon Nadir Shah's murder in 1747, one of his nobles, Ahmed Shah Abdali, an Afghan,

also known as Ahmad Shah Durrani (from 1747 to 1772) rose to prominence and established an

Afghan Empire not separate from India. The Frontier Province became part of the Afghan Empire, which included Afghanistan, Sindh, Multan and Kashmir. The Durrani ruled the Frontier Province till the rise of the Sikhs in the Punjab under Maharaja Ranjit Singh, who invaded the Frontier or Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province and defeated the effete and weak descendants of Ahmed Shah Durrani.

The Sikh invasion began in 1818. Dera Ismail Khan, a city in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, was overrun

in that year, and five years later, the Marwat plains shared a similar fate. In 1834, two years after

the defeat of the Pakhtun tribes near Nowshera by the Sikhs, General Hari Singh finally seized

Peshawar Fort and Maharajah Ranjit Singh became the Suzerain of the Frontier Province. The

Sikhs power was annihilated through wars with the British in 1846 and 1849 and by the Proclamation of 29th March, 1849, the Frontier districts, along with the Punjab, were incorporated within the British Empire.

The above-cited short journey to the history of Indo-Pak carries enough justification to negate the self-proclaimed beliefs of Pakhtuns' invincibility and unrivalled glory. Except for a few Afghan rulers, Pakhtun land has always been dominated by non-Pakhtun and non-Muslim invaders from around, leaving Pakhtuns with their highly complex and misinterpreted identity.

The uncertainty about the origin and identity of Pakhtuns is evident not just in the views of a common Pakhtun but also the literature penned down regarding their origin. As a result, Pakhtuns in order to overcome the complexes regarding their origin and foreign influences unconsciously portray themselves and want other to see them as a distinct ethnic group in the world. Pakhtuns practice the code of Pakhtunwali and adhere to their traditional practices with

more zeal and fervor in order to prove their ethnic groups' virginity. The continuous struggle in

doing so, have led them to develop highly aggrandized attitudes about themselves. The Pakhtuns

although forming the second largest ethnic group of Pakistan having around 15 percent stakes in

the country' s population after the dominant ethnic group, Punjabis, could not fully assimilate

into the state partly because of their urge to create a Pashtun state, Pashtunistan. The yearning for

an independent state is although profoundly strong within the hearts of many Pakhtuns but practically little organized efforts have been made to demand or struggle for Pakhtunistsn.

The



largest ethno-linguistic Pakhtun party of Pakistan, the Awami National Party, formed in 1987 and the successor of National Awami Party formed in 1950s, has avowedly declared that its existence has been for the attainment of Pakhtun rights within the Pakistani federation and not to demand a separate homeland for Pakhtuns. This psychological irredentism among the Pakhtuns in Pakistan is also because of their self-aggrandized identity which has not had allowed them to fully integrate into Pakistan. (Behuria, 2005; Cohen, 2005; Jaffrelot, 2005; Waseem; 2006; Weiss, 1999;).

Conclusion:

Pakhtuns as a people and ethnic group do not have one pellucid identity. There are several sources of Pakhtun identity ranging from Israelite to Aryan or Greek origin. Moreover, as Pakhtuns cannot deny or would like to dissociate with Islam, the dominant religion among Pakhtuns. They also claim to have converted to Islam at once and as a community not individually in order to reinforce their claim to be the best Muslims. The very reason that Israelites, Aryan or Hellenistic races remained invincible and dominant in their heydays most members of Pakhtun ethnic group associate their identity with these races for selfaggrandizement.

In case of Pakhtuns association with Islam is also due largely to the belief that it is the last of the celestial faiths and cannot be supplanted by any other till the existence of this universe. Associating with these races and religion is fundamentally to consider themselves the most aggrandized and elated people and conveying the same to the outsiders. This could simply be called the prevalence of excessive arrogance and pride among Pakhtuns regarding their identity. This is despite of the fact that Pakhtuns have a blurred identity and associating themselves with different races simultaneously does not make any sense. This strong sense of make-believe identity is a very important characteristic of Pakhtuns and has monumental social consequences.

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