

# Pashto Under the British Empire

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## Abstract

The literary history of Pashto in the Colonial Period is often overlooked. Pashto or Pukhto, like many other oriental languages prospered under the British rule. During that phase most of the existing written literature was produced as a result of English influence. In this article, I shall attempt to chronicle the important literary events under the Raj and the Pashtun Renaissance.

## Contents

<b>1 Historical Background</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2 Interest in Pashto</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>3 Literary Contributions</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>4 General Review of the British Period</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>17</b>

## 1 Historical Background

Around the year 1800, the entire Pashto-speaking belt (from the Southern and Eastern Afghanistan to the right banks of river Indus in the present North-Western Frontier and Baluchistan provinces of Pakistan) formed a part of the Kingdom of Afghanistan.

The British East India Company - which was established for spice trading under a royal charter of Queen Elizabeth I in 1600 AD - eventually launched British rule in India. Following the 1857 Indian mutiny,

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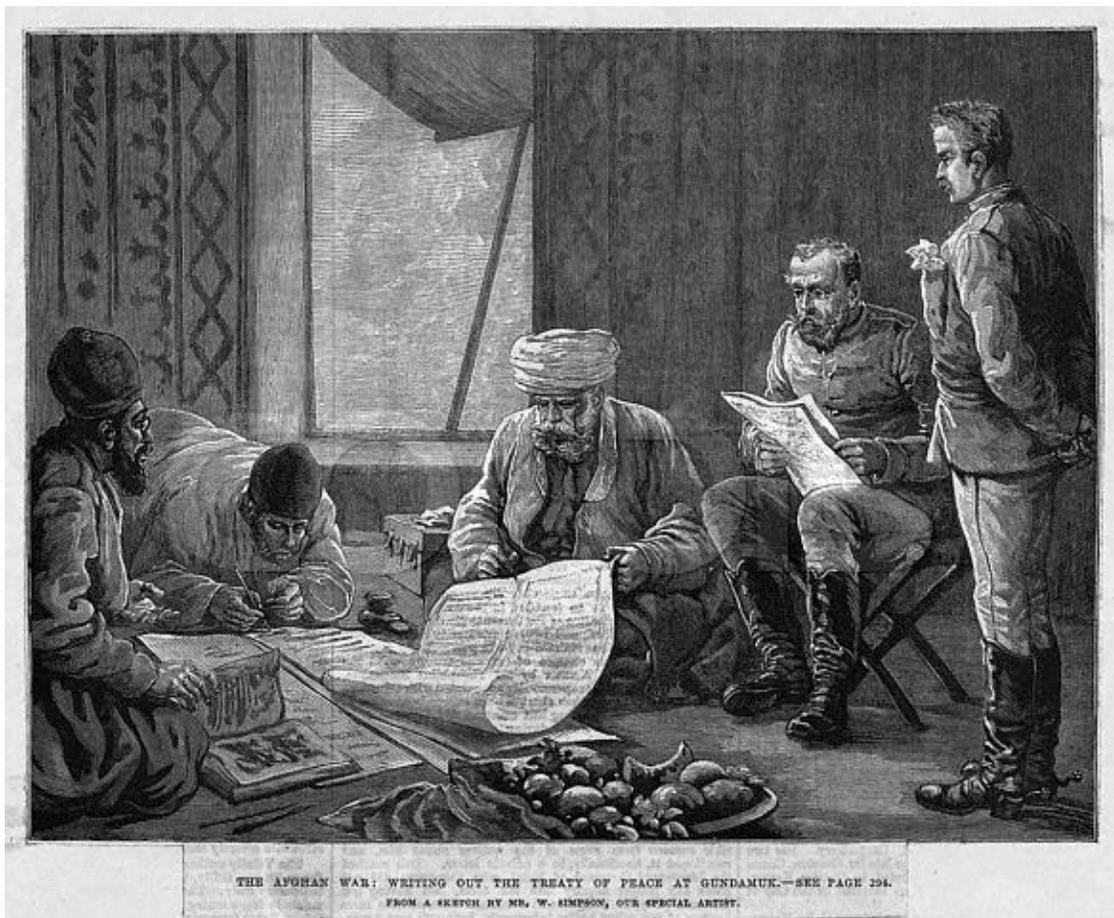


Figure 1: The Gandamak Treaty was Signed in 1893

its rule over India became a subject of debate and by the Act of Parliament the British Crown officially took over the administration of India in 1858 - establishing the British 'Raj'.

Besides the British, other imperial powers, like Russian, Persian and the French were aspiring to exert their influence over Afghanistan. Earlier on, internal power struggle between the Afghan rulers - complicated by Sikh invasions - had enabled a British expansion westwards, and the East India Company succeeded in establishing itself at Peshawar in 1849 - the once Winter capital of Afghanistan where their rule continued for the next hundred years.

In their attempts to annex regions beyond the Khyber many Anglo-Afghan battles were fought, but Colonial Empire could not match its earlier successes in India. Taking advantage of the feuds within the reigning Afghan dynasties, the British did succeed however, in making them sign the Peace Treaty of Gandamak in 1879. A 1200 kilometres long Durand line was drawn in 1893, thus cutting the Pashto speaking homeland (described above) into Afghan and British Indian halves. This demarcation later gave rise to the North-Western Frontier Province of British India in 1901, which hitherto was a part of Punjab.

It was a two-pronged arrangement, one which helped the colonists to consolidate their imperial control over The British Indian side of the border, and in addition, across the Durand Line, they were able to

maintain indirect influence over Afghanistan - known as the 'Forward Policy'.

Nearly half a century of colonial rule in the Frontier followed - a region which in the past had become a corridor for invasions. An uneasy truce prevailed with Afghanistan until the British Empire finally ended in 1947 with the partition of India and creation of Pakistan.

## 2 Interest in Pashto

Pashto or the vernacular language of the majority Afghans, drew the attention of those in the services of East India Company as early as in the first half of the Nineteenth Century.

Amongst the first arrivals to learn Pashto were the European missionaries who came to spread the message of the Holy Bible in this part of the world. The earliest texts in Pashto to get printed were translations of Bible passages and other religious material by the Serampur Baptist Mission Press in 1818.

On a much greater scale later, the British civil and military officials learned Pashto for administrative purposes to achieve self-sufficiency in interacting with Pathans - or Pashtuns or Pakhtuns as they are often called - and to acquire knowledge of the people who spoke it.

George W. Gilbertson in the preface to 'First Pukkhtoo Book' (1901) says:

'He (a Pathan) is withal a proud man, prone to meet scorn with scorn, and ever ready to return blow for blow. That we cannot address him in his own language, and deal with him direct without the help of middlemen, he attributes to either of two reasons, incapacity to learn his language, or indifference to him, his people and his affairs.'(Gilbertson, 1901)

Further on he writes:

'...his is not the race to be despised and crushed by brute-force, although, perchance, this is the only force of which he has conscious knowledge. Rather should we un-remittingly strive towards knowing the man as he is, by learning his language; towards making ourselves familiar with him and his surroundings; towards eradicating, slowly but surely, his ignorance and his waywardness, by a treatment, stern but well-considered, just, and in harmony with the religious beliefs, traditions, and customs of his country; withal towards a policy of clemency, encouragement, and protection; of paternal approbation; not of discouragement and extermination.'(Gilbertson, 1901)

In S.S. Thorburn, *Bannu Or Our Afghan Frontier* Trübner & Co. London, 1876, while recounting the effect of a Pashto speaking Englishman on a Pathan tribesman, S. S. Thorburn notes:

'The delight of a hill Pathan in being addressed by a Sahib in his mother Pashto is always genuine and irrepressible; his whole face, which ordinarily wears a fixed touch-me-if-you-dare almost defiant expression, breaks into one broad grin as he wonderingly asks you, "Eh, you talk Pashto, how did you learn it?" It is just the sort of question a Highlander would ask did a Southerner address him in Gaelic. The gain in personal influence, besides other advantages,



Figure 2: An English General Meets a Pathan Chieftain - 1979

which an ability to converse directly with the people gives an Englishman amongst Pathans is so obvious that I need not dilate on it.'

These were the main reasons, which accounted for the Colonial interest in Pashto. According to Dr Sher Zaman Taizi, a renowned researcher and formerly affiliated with BBC Afghan Education in 'A matter of identity' (1997):

'During the second half of the Nineteenth century, Pashto Munshi Fazil and Adeb Fazil classes were included in the syllabi of the Punjab University on the recommendation of the Allama Mir Ahmad Shah Rizwani.'

Institution of examination was deemed necessary and in early 1873, examination in colloquial Pashto was made mandatory for all civil officials serving in those districts where Pashto was spoken. Moreover, interpretership courses designed specially for military officers under guidance of regimental 'munshis' - or language teachers - were introduced that were highly recommended and encouraged, for instance, by higher salaries and other positive incentives.

### 3 Literary Contributions

There was a long lapse in literary developments during the Eighteenth and early Nineteenth century until the arrival of the British in this region. The early Pashto literature of colonial period consisted of grammar books and collections of oral poetry and tales. They were written in a self-serving manner in order to provide samples of the language and to make it possible for the British officials to learn Pashto. They dealt with grammar and commonly spoken idioms and phrases. Their authors were often British administrators-turned-writers who compiled them under guidance from native Afghan scholars of those times.

'The Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal' in 1838 published the first scientific study of vocabulary by Major Robert Leech of Bombay Engineers - a distinguished oriental scholar - that mentioned Teerhai,



Figure 3: Gravestone of Isidor Loewenthal in Peshawar

and the Deer dialects (Pashto spoken in Dir and Tirah parts of the Frontier).<sup>1</sup> His untimely death in 1845, at the age of 33, cut short a promising career.

A German Professor, Dr. Bernhard Dorn who lived in St. Petersburg - which at the time was the Russian capital - worked on 'Grammatische Übersicht' or Grammatical Overview (1840) and later compiled: 'A Chrestomathy of the Pushtu or Afghan language' (1847).<sup>2</sup> A chrestomathy is a collection of selected literary passages, often by one author and especially from a foreign language. Professor Dorn was also among the founding members of the National Russian Library, St. Petersburg.

Isidor Loewenthal, an orthodox Jew in Poland, born in Germany and just graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary - New Jersey, became an Evangelist missionary in Peshawar under the auspices of the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions. Here he translated the New Testament in Pashto and embarked upon compiling a Pashto Dictionary before he died at age 37. His grave is in the Christian Cemetery Peshawar where he was buried. His tombstone bears the following inscription:

'Rev. Isidor Loewenthal, of the American Presbyterian Mission who translated the New Testament into Pushtoo ... was shot by his Chokeydar, April 27, 1864.'

Dr. Henry Walter Bellew, a surgeon in the Bengal Army wrote the first book by any British on Pashto Grammar, 'A Grammar of the Poshoo Language'. Priced at Rupees Five, it was published by the

<sup>1</sup>Robert Leech, Epitome of the grammars of the Brahuiki, Balochky, andãÑ Panjabi languages with vocabularies of the Baraky, Pashi, Laghmani, Cashgari, Teerhai, and Deer dialects., Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal 7 1838

<sup>2</sup>Boris Andreevich Dorn, *A Chrestomathy of the Pushtū Or Afghan Language: to Which Is Subjoined A Glossary In Afghan And English* St. Petersburg : Printed for the Imperial Academy of Sciences, 1847

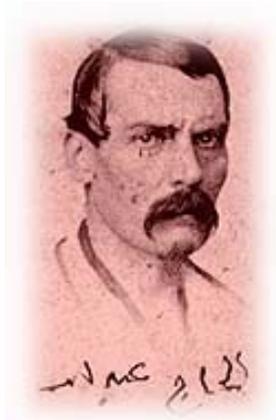


Figure 4: Sir Richard Francis Burton

Baptist Mission Press-Calcutta in 1854 (Bellew, 1854).

The credit for undertaking the most comprehensive work on Pashto Language accomplished by any author during Colonial Period goes to Henry George Raverty who was a military lieutenant of the Bombay Army. While serving in Peshawar in 1849-50 he was taught Pashto by a learned linguist, Maulvi (later Qazi) Abdur Rahman Khan Muhammadzai of Hashtnagar - translator of Old Testament from Hebrew and John Bunyan's 'Pilgrim's Progress' into Pashto among other notable literary works. Abdur Rahman had also taught the legendary Sir Richard Francis Burton when he was serving as a lieutenant in East India Company (Burton was a multi-lingual explorer, writer and under cover military spy for British who later translated the famous classic 'Arabian Nights' from Arabic into English in his much publicized adventurous life and also became one of the few non-Muslims ever to perform Hajj in Makkah under the guise of a Pathan in 1853).

H. G. Raverty had abundant experience in documentation related work. Moinuddin Khan, a well-known scholar of library sciences in an article, 'Bibliographical Landscape' (DAWN 2001) states:

'Raverty set the tradition of compiling district gazetteers. He wrote and illustrated an account of the district of Peshawar (1849-50) when he was stationed with his regiment. He was an administrator-turned-writer who entered the services of East India. In the administrative capacity he participated in the Punjab Campaign (1849-1850 and took part in the first Frontier Expedition (1856) against tribes of Swat Border. He was also assistant commissioner of Punjab from 1852-1859)'

Raverty published his first Pashto book on grammar in 1855: 'A Grammar of the Pukhto, Pushto or Language of the Afghans' (Raverty, 1855). He also compiled a dictionary: 'A Dictionary of the Puk'hto, Pus'hto, or Language of the Afghans' (Raverty, 1860a). This comprehensive hardback Pashto to English dictionary had over 1100 pages. Each Pashto word was written in Pashto script and then romanized, with definitions and easy to read printing.

At a time when there was insufficient written literature except for a few dewans and largely oral poetry, Raverty studied old Pashto texts and published two books. Following the trend of other authors of that time he gave his first book an oriental name: 'The Gulistan-i-Roh: Afghan Poetry and Prose' (Raverty,

1860b). It was a selection of ten poetical and six prose works that he had compiled from antiquated manuscripts in his personal possession which included authors like Akhund Darwezah, Babu Jan, Abdur Rahman Baba, Khushal Khan Khattak, etc. H G Raverty, *Selections from the Poetry of the Afghans, from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century* 1862 was his other significant work.

In the preface to ‘Gulistan-i-Roh’ (Second Edition, 1867), Raverty admits to the difficulties faced by him in compiling these texts due to insufficient written Pashto material and other hardships:

‘Pushto manuscripts of any antiquity are now become scarce, even amongst the Afghans, whose language it is. This has, doubtless, been caused by the numerous civil convulsions which Afghanistan has undergone during the last sixty years, in which period the cultivation of the Afghan language has, comparatively, declined. Hence the few works now to be met with are generally full of errors, from the fact of the Katibs, or Copyists, being, with rare exceptions, persons wholly unacquainted with the Pushto language, and not Afghans, who are, generally, indifferent writers.’

The last two works mentioned above can be described as the finest compilations of existing ancient Pashto literature ever done. Raverty, who retired from Bombay Army at the rank of a Major and became a full-fledged writer, brought out the ‘Gospels’ (1864) and later ‘Fables of Aesop Al-Hakim’ in Pushtu (1871) and ‘The Pushtu Manual’ (1904). H. G. Raverty’s remarkable documentation work set a precedent for other authors. As the best-known authority and chief pioneer of Colonial Period, he rendered invaluable contributions towards preservation of Pashto literature.

French interest in Pashto is evident by publication of ‘Chants Populaires des Afghans’ د پښتونخواه د شعرهار او بهار, compilation work on Pashto poetry and songs by James Darmesteter in (1877), which was financed by the French Government. Key emphasis of French literary circles however, remained on Persian in that period. The use of ‘Pakhtunkhwa’ was a non-politicised term then and is used naturally in the title to describe the region where Pashto is spoken.

The name of Mir Ahmad Shah Rizwani figures prominently in the latter half of the Nineteenth Century among Pashto literary figures. Textbooks for Munshi Fazil and Adeeb Fazil classes of the Punjab University courses were written and compiled by him, according to Dr Sher Zaman Taizi.

Rev T B Hughes, *Ganj-e Pakhto گنج پښتو* 1897 whose English translation was rendered by Trevor C. Plouden, became the official textbook for Lower standard examinations in Pashto and ‘Kalid-i-Afghani’ (including Tarikh-i-Mahmud-i-Ghaznavi) for Higher Standard.

Pashto language manuals provided learning aids for those new to the language. ‘Pashto Manual’ (1904) by H. G. Raverty, ‘Khazana-i-Afghani’, ‘Sawal-o-Jawab’ and ‘Pushto Guide’ all by Maulvi Muhammad Ismail Khan, ‘1000 Pashto idioms and sentences’ (1899) by Capt E. H. S. Boxer, ‘Lessons in Pakkhtoo Prose Composition’ (1900) and ‘First Pukkhtoo Book’ (1901) by G.W. Gilbertson and First and second



Figure 5: Sir G. Roos-Keppel

Pukhtu Manual (1907) by G. Roos-Keppel, are some of the earliest guide books on colloquial Pashto worth mentioning.

Notable writers besides Raverty and Bellew who authored books on Grammar included: Lt. Col. John C. Vaughan 1864, Rev. E. Trumpp 1873 and Maj. A. D. Cox 1911 etc. H.W. Bellew in (1870) had also compiled 'Dictionary of Pukkto Language'. In this dictionary words were traced to their roots in Persian, Arabic and Indian (Sanskrit) languages.

The ground work it would seem should have been sufficiently covered by the learning manuals written by Raverty, Bellew and Trumpp but they focused more on elementary and fell short of addressing complex matters of construction, syntax and idiom. To fill out this deficiency Major D. L. R. Lorimer, who whilst serving with the Khyber Rifles in Landi Kotal, worked on 'A Syntax of Colloquial Pushtu' (1915), which was published by the Oxford University Press - London. While explaining the need for a new learning book, Lorimer in its preface mentions:

"Both Raverty and Trumpp have based their work on Pashtu literature, which is a serious draw back for the average student, who wants, as speedily as may be, to acquire a working knowledge of the Colloquial Language. This is hardly to be gained from a study of poetry or translations from the Persian, mostly two or three hundred years old, which are affected by Persian models or Persian originals, and which have had little influence on the speech of an unliterary and illiterate people."

Sir George Roos-Keppel's name has become synonymous with the Islamia College Peshawar - which also owes its establishment to the efforts of Nawab Sahibzada Sir Abdul Qayyum Khan and Haji Turangzai. Roos-Keppel had a long administrative association with the Frontier region. He served in the capacities of Political Agent in Kurram and Khyber and later Chief Commissioner (equivalent of Governor) of NWFP. At the turn of the Twentieth century, he was also president of Central Committee of Examiners in Pashto. He authored 'The Pashto Manual' in (1901) and wrote a second impression in (1907) when he was serving as Captain in the Khyber. In 1901, he also produced his own editions of Rev T. B. Hughes' 'Ganj-i-Pashto' and 'Tarikh-i-Sultan Mahmud-i-Ghaznavi' with their English translations, which became standard textbooks for Military officers replacing the older versions.

Roos-Keppel was well versed in Pashto and his command over colloquial can be judged from an inaugural speech he gave in Islamia College Peshawar in 1913-14. A strongly built man of mixed Dutch-Swedish-English blood, he bore a thick Edwardian moustache. When Roos-Keppel came to address, he mesmerized the entire gathering by the rendering of his speech in perfect Pashto. (To give the reader an idea I must present a snippet exactly as narrated by Late Dr. M. Zarif of Nishterabad - writer's maternal grandfather who was present in the audience):

After the initial salutations and thanks in Pashto, he began:

يو ورځ په دې لار تېرېدم نو زړه كښې مې سوچ او كړو چې ياره روس كېله، داسې به ښه نه وي  
چې دلته كښې يو تعليمي اداره جوړ كړې شي؟

"Yo wraaz pah day lar teradum no zra kay may soach ooko, yarra Roos-Keppela dasay ba kha na-ee chih dalta keh yo taleemi idara jor kray shi?"

(One day while I was walking past this place, I thought to myself: my good fellow Roos-Keppel, wouldn't it be splendid to build an educational institute over this site?)

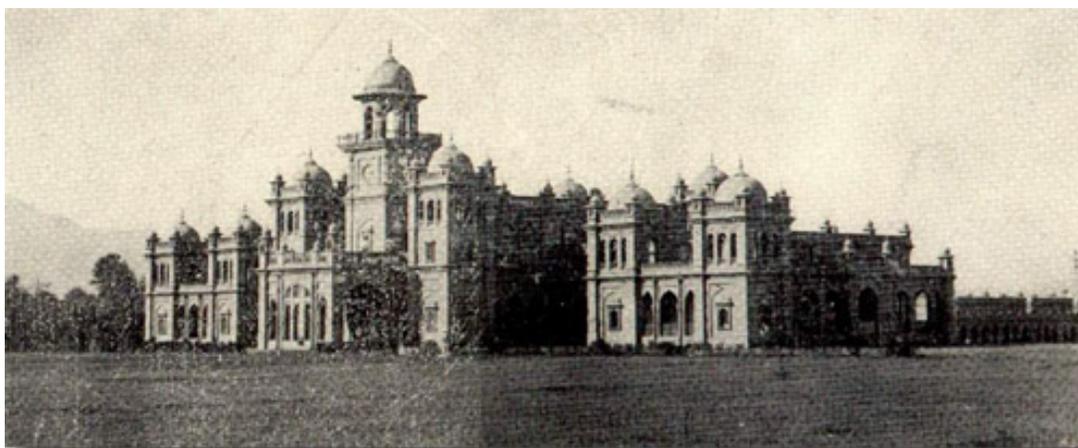


Figure 6: Oldest Recorded Picture of Islamia College

A hushed silence held the audience which was only broken when Roos-Keppel finished his speech. The echoes of 'Roos-Keppel Zindabad' followed a loud round of applause from the gathering as he received a standing ovation.

(Here, it is important to point out that Roos-Keppel thought like a Pathan, for him to use the expression "Yarra Roos-Keppela" - adding 'a' in the end of one's name - is significant, as it is unique to Pashto colloquial only. To hear him say that would have brought a smile on any Pathan's face and would have made the audience forget that he was a foreigner addressing them, but rather as 'one of their own.')

Sir Olaf Caroe, in 'The Pathans' (1957) makes the following observation about Roos-Keppel:

"A very fluent speaker of their language, he could turn a proverb, point a moral, quote a poet, make a domestic allusion in perfect timing and in communion with those who heard him."

Further on, he concludes:

"More than any Englishman, if such he was, he is remembered still; he has been claimed as a sort of malik in excelsis, a Pathan among Pathans."

Until 1909, Pashto literature was confined to book pages in the form of poetry and dastan (classic literature), then Hakim Syed Abdullah Shah, editor of 'Afghan' introduced it in the columns of his newspaper and made it available for reading by general public. Later in 1926, a magazine was launched by the same name. Another magazine 'Sarhad' had been launched the previous year which was followed by 'Pakhtun' in 1927. The launch of these publications contributed immensely to the development of literature at a time when the Frontier was strife with commotion, the memory of the third Anglo-Afghan war was still fresh and bans on anti-state publications were not uncommon. These publications cultivated the seeds of political awareness among Pathans - Pashto being the unifying factor. Apart from being the forerunners to founding of various literary circles, they placed many learned and respected Pashto scholars, writers and poets of that time under limelight, which includes a very long list and about whom a lot has been written which is beyond the scope of the present article.



Figure 7: Qazi Ahmad Jan

In the preface to *د قصه خواني گپ* 'Da Kissa Khane Gap', Col. C.L. Peart, Secretary Board of Examiners (Simla - 1930) writes:

"In 1923 it was decided to follow the practice of the Civil Service Commissioners in England and to abolish text-books for army language examinations. This scheme worked well except in the case of Pashto. The negligible prose literature which exists in that language does not lend itself to the learning of the language. It is either archaic or full of flowery Arabic and Persian expressions. And owing to the limited sale of Pashto books, no modern author would come forward with a book to meet our requirements.

These difficulties led to the partial re-introduction of textbooks for Pashto examinations - the 'Hagha Dagha' *هغه دغه* (Odds and Ends - 1929) for Preliminary, and the History of Afghanistan (1930) and the 'Da Kissa Khane Gap' *د قصه خواني گپ* (Gossip of Qissa Khwani - 1930) for the Interpretership examinations - all by the same author, Qazi Ahmad Jan of Peshawar."

Qazi Ahmad Jan had a scholarly background. His father Qazi Abdur Rahman Khan Muhammadzai, a scholar of Pashto and Arabic was among the first Afghans to achieve command over English language. Ahmad Jan enjoyed the status of 'Munshi of Peshawar'. He also compiled papers for examination boards in Pashto. He had taught language to British officers in Peshawar for over half a century, which included names like Field Marshals: Wavell, Auchinleck and Montgomery etc.

Following in the path of Mir Ahmad Shah Rizwani, he authored several academic books. He introduced a new simplistic and lucid style in Pashto prose literature which was modern, inspired by English writings and at the same time retained its natural flow. Furthermore, he promoted a new genre of 'short story' in Pashto, hitherto only confined to English literary works. His books were not only popular among the British officials but also appealed to the Pashto speakers from all general walks of life.

A few lines from his earliest poem titled Zhaba or Language ('Ganj-i-Pashto', Roos-Keppel edition 1901) are as follows:

خصوصان چې پښتو ژبي ته حاجت

پيڅ وؤ دېر زياتي له حد د ساعت  
 احمد اوکړه په د شان آسان کلام  
 چې پوهېږي پرې کل واره خاص و عام

"Khasoosan chih Pukhto zhabbey tah hajat  
 Pekh woh Der Ziatay La Hadd da Sa'at  
 Ahmad okra pah da shaan asaan kalaam  
 Chih pohagey pre kul warah khaas ao aam"

(Especially when Pashto language was experiencing hardships  
 Befallen for a great deal of time,  
 Ahmad made its style easy; gracing it with what was needed most  
 That everybody comprehends it now, young, common and elite both)

Aside from laying the foundations of modern Pashto prose literature he authored several handbooks that include: 'Afridi Pushtu Manual' (190?), 'Pushtu Made Easy' (1912) and 'How to Speak Pushtu' (1917), etc. Another writer accredited with work on modern Pashto language guidebooks is Qazi Rahimullah Khan Khalil, a regimental munshi and author of 'Modern Pushtu Instructor' (Vol. I - 1937 & Vol. II - 1943).

The modernity introduced by western influences was for the most part beneficial to the Pashto language. Its vocabulary became enriched and varied whilst also retaining its originality. In older Pashto textbooks, the pre-modern worldview seemed to revolve around a recurring theme of religious beliefs and magical, non-rational stories about legendary heroic romances, evil kings, demons, jinns and divine emissaries etc. Scientific methodology introduced by the British brought about refinement and added diversity to the literature which then began to reflect a more modern point of view.

Pashto language also became the symbol of cultural identity of people living in this region. Once viewed as a primitive tongue, Pashto discarded its archaic image in the Colonial Period and carved a name for itself amongst the progressive languages of the world.

## 4 General Review of the British Period

Pashto renaissance was not confined to literature and in books. It also gave an impetus to the Pathan identity, culture and this region in general.

As the British empire expanded, a growing attitude of racial superiority enveloped colonial practices in India. Confronted by a race who guarded their honour and freedom with great fierceness, early authors treated them more severely in their descriptions. Pathans were often painted as 'uncivilized', 'semi-barbaric' and 'treacherous.' These types of labels are often met with in earlier accounts of those experiencing the 'menace' of the Frontier firsthand. They were guided by a notion of British self-aggrandizement, as Lord Salisbury, the Prime Minister of Great Britain, had once said:

"They (Frontier Wars) are but the surf that marks the edge and advance of the wave of civilization."



Figure 8: Blockhouses Like This Dotted The Afghan Hills

Later English authors, while recounting the dangers of the Khyber Pass, narrated the legendary ferocity of the Pathans evoking scenes of gallant soldiers defending the might of the Raj against equally gallant but merciless Pathans. The Pathans began to be regarded as a martial race, natural rulers and the equals of the British - though not merely for romantic reasons and more for political purposes, as some have argued.

"You're white people - sons of Alexander - and not like common, black Mohammedans" - or so Dravot, the main character of Rudyard Kipling's 'The Man Who Would Be King' (1891) addresses the Pathans.

Weighing a Pathan against an Englishman for their valour in 'The Ballad of East and West', Kipling exclaims:

"Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet, Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat; But there is neither East nor West, Border nor Breed, nor Birth, When two strong men stand face to face, Though they come from the ends of the earth!"

Colonel 'Buster' Goodwin stationed for twenty years on the Frontier expresses his feelings about Pathans this way:

"Our dealing with Pathans was a gentleman's game. No matter how poor a Pathan was, he might meet the King of England or the Viceroy of India but he'd look him in the eye and shake hands with him as if to say, I'm as good a man as you are."

In 'Memoirs of a Junior Officer' (1951) M.C.A. Henniker, whose company was engaged in building a blockhouse or a miniature fort on a hill-top overlooking the Khyber Pass, writes:

"A curious thing was the water supply for the Block Houses. This came by a pipe-line laid over the hills from the pumping station below. The pipe could have been easily cut by the Afridis, but this was never done. They considered rules as necessary in warfare as we did. Cutting the water pipes of the Raj would be as immoral as the use by us of poison gas."

Numerous such writings captured the imagination of readers on the other side of the globe, kindling a romantic view of the region and its people.

Formal education in the Frontier was introduced by British to replace traditional Madrassa style education. Shortly after the demarcation of Afghanistan from British India by the Durand line in 1893, there were numerous primary and secondary schools in the NWFP of British India that had been set up by the colonial power, but on the other hand, the pace of schooling and education remained slower in Afghanistan under the Amirs.

Abdul Ghaffar Khan - a famed Pathan leader and advocate of non-violence - was educated at Edwardes Memorial High School in Peshawar, which was run by Christian missionaries. Under the guidance of his teacher Rev. E.F.E. Wigram, he obtained a window to the world that contrasted sharply with the widespread illiteracy among his fellow Pathans. As a result, education as an instrument of social uplift and political transformation became the dominant obsession of his life.

Whilst the hill tribes continued to resist imperialism, the British founded Edwardes college (1901) and Islamia college in Peshawar (1913) - as well as several schools - in those Pashto dominated regions which had come to terms with their rule. For comparison, the Universities of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras were founded as far back as in 1857. Education empowered the middle class and led to political reawakening in this region.

The previous history of the Frontier is obscure - with conflicting accounts from Muslim writers, many of which are mere historical romances founded on a slender basis of facts. The British introduced scientific methodology to the process. What they wrote extensively about Afghan history and civilization (from 1800s onwards) is of course conclusive. This is owing to the peculiar English trait of diary writing. Many officials who served in the subcontinent kept a journal in which they recorded their memoirs. Renowned author S. Amjad Hussain in 'Of Cantonments and British Sahibs' (DAWN - Dec 2002) notes:

"Most of these books were written, often in a self-serving manner, by the British officers and administrators to chronicle events along the turbulent Frontier."

One towering name is that of Mountstuart Elphinstone. 'Kingdom of Caubul (2 vols. - 1815) is the pioneering work for which he is most famous. It arose out of the time he spent in Kabul as part of the first British envoy's party from 1808-1810. This work is one of the first comprehensive examinations of Afghanistan's geography, political history, language, the customs and social structure of its inhabitants - including even the various fringe tribes.

There is no dearth of historical writings by English authors-cum-administrators whose accounts are valid testimony to culture and language to this day. The accounts were often provided with other references. The narrators relied on native history without prejudice more or less and presented it more systematically. There are several references in Elphinstone's works from 'Babarnama' (Babar, a Sixteenth century Mughal king who kept a journal - a valid historical account of Afghanistan and the Frontier region) and works of other Muslim historians.

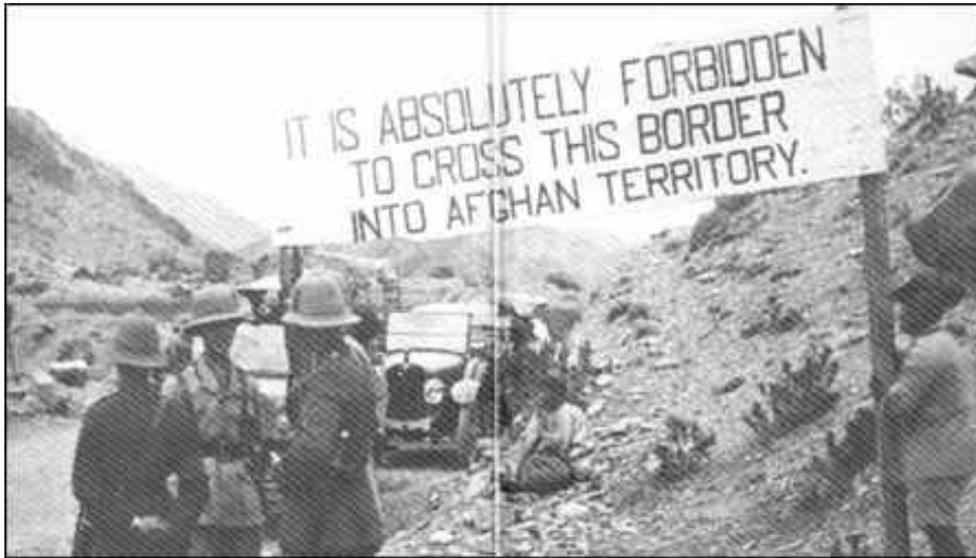


Figure 9: Torkham Checkpost in 1919

'The Pathans' (1957) by Sir Olaf Caroe - now rated a classic - is the last standard reference work of significance about this race rendered by an official who served during the colonial period. He was also amongst the last British governors of NWFP.

Aside from writing Afghan histories, the most comprehensive early surveys were done mainly by the British. Sir George Abraham Grierson - an Irish philologist - directed the compilation of the exhaustive 'Linguistic Survey of India' between 1894-1927. It dealt with the Pashto language comprehensively and was based on 19 volumes. Another European researcher, G. Morgenstierne - a Norwegian, carried out linguistic research in Afghanistan in the 1920s. Dr. H. Bellew had also done similar work between 1860-1880. Our present knowledge about philology of Pashto is mainly based upon the pioneering contributions of the above-mentioned researchers.

The British have preserved antiquated Pashto manuscripts, which can be found in their libraries and museums. 'Catalogue of Pashto Manuscripts in the Libraries of the British Isles' (1965) is one example and gives a comprehensive listing of some of this vast literary wealth of the bygone days.

Beyond doubt, the rule of the British over Frontier can never be justified on the mere basis of 'Christian pride' and 'white supremacy', but in comparison with other empires like the Russian, Persian and the French closing in on this region - who had made no secrets of their own imperial designs - indeed, for much of their time here, the British were the most developed nation on the planet. They made unprecedented technological advances and brought benefits of that to the Frontier.

The British gave the concept of western democracy. They integrated semi-independent states and brought them in line with a central policy. They introduced the rule of law, regulation to Government and an impartial judiciary. They systemized revenue collection and started land reforms. They extended individual liberties, allowed a fairly free press and ran a mostly non-corrupt civil service.

Additionally, they were the first to carry out demographical, political, geographical and other surveys in this region. Census reports were brought out and cadastral maps were drawn up during their rule. Anthropological studies and extensive archaeological excavations were carried out.



Figure 10: An officer with the Frontier corps

They improved the health system and built hospitals, introducing modern western medicine replacing out dated practices.

The British built extensive infrastructure, which are still being used today. They founded new settlements or cantonments, introduced city planning, set up housing registries, named streets, built elaborate road systems, bridges, railways, airfields etc. They dug extensive irrigation canal systems and built dams providing hydel electricity. They improved dak (postal) services as well as the telegraph, telephone and radio facilities.

They introduced the art of modern warfare. They had a disciplined army of which the Pathans constituted a sizable number. Their outstanding bravery against Germans won many laurels for Britain in the Second World War. Quite often, the battlefield transmits were in Pashto of which the enemy had no knowledge.

Modernization touched different other spheres of the Frontier life, like the arts, the culture and other practices - in fields as diverse as the architecture or the sports or even dress - the British have left their impressions behind.

In primary industry, they brought in better farming methods and improved care of livestock. During their rule, there was increased flow of labour to other parts of the empire. However, the general economic, trade and industrial impact of British policies was negligible in this region.

The other inherent shortcoming of the colonial rule was a policy of subjugation of natives and exploitation of the resources for the economic benefit of Great Britain, which considered itself a superior power.

This period also saw deprivation of masses from upper echelons of decision-making. A handful of elites were lavishly pampered at the expense of a majority poor, dissatisfied and illiterate class. There was no tolerance for opposition and rebellions were crushed with utmost ruthlessness.

It was this sinister nature of imperial rule, which could not succeed in the long run. As with all great empires of the past, the repeating pattern on the historical canvas of the Frontier saw the colonial power ascend triumphantly - in all its might and glory - before reaching an eventual decline. With the partition of India and creation of Pakistan in 1947 - the sun had finally set on the British Empire.

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