

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF BAZAR VALLEY EXPEDITION, 1908



Dr. Saeeda

Lecturer in Pakistan Studies, Jinnah College for Women, University of Peshawar, saeeda.jcw@uop.edu.pk

Abstract: *The paper reflects the nineteenth-century British imperialist desire to subdue the Pashtun tribes, most notably the Zakha Khel Afridi tribe, along the North-West Frontier of India with a view to politically coax and militarily coerce them, by carrying out military expedition in 1908, thereby immersing them in the imperial power politics. The paper argues that the British government justified military interference under the disguise of jurisdiction and law, hypocritically branding these expeditions as a judicial act. As a consequence, the tribesmen residing on the most remote fringes of the subcontinent, were subjected to threats, penalties and military operations. In order to fill a gap in the existing knowledge on the theme, this paper employs historical approach with Empiric-Analytic reason as a tool.*

Keywords: *Zakha Khel Afridi, British Government, Bazar Valley Expedition, Jirga*

Introduction

The Afridi was a large tribe dwelling in the lower and easternmost spurs of the Safed Koh range, including the Bazar and Bara Valleys.ⁱ In times of calamity, mutual ambition and vengeance would always unite them although they were constantly at feud with one another.ⁱⁱ According to Elphinstone, among the Afghans, the Afridis were the greatest robbers.ⁱⁱⁱ Warburton believes that from his earliest childhood, an Afridi was taught to look upon his nearest relative as his deadliest enemy. Kindness, trust and sincerity however would transform an Afridi into a devoted friend.^{iv} One of the most admirable qualities of the Afridi was that they greatly respected their grey bearded elders. If a quarrel between two Afridi tribes persisted, a truce called “*Tega Kekhoda*” was arranged on the advice of the elders. The *Tega* or pledge was never broken and it sometimes assumed the form of permanent peace. Sometimes it existed for a few years as a temporary peace. The Afridis were also famous for their hospitality. Every Afridi village had a *Hujra* or village club which served as a guest

house.^v In *Hujra* unmarried men of every family slept not only for gossip, but also for a timely retaliation if an attack occurred.

Rivaj (customary law) was the standard law for adjudication. Among the Afridis, the parties rarely requested for adjudication under religious law or *sharia* which was common in other tribes.^{vi} *Jirga* was a remarkable feature of Afridi tribal society. The *Jirga* performed the judicial function of dispute settlement, determination of guilt or arbitration. In connection with the major issues of importance to the tribe, the *Jirga* served as a mechanism by which the collective decisions or demands were communicated to the other tribes. The *Jirga* also had the legislative function to perform by pronouncing verdicts on important matters regulating conducts.^{vii}

The Afridi tribe, like other Pashtun tribes, had a pyramidal structure. The tribe (*Qabeela* or *Qaum*) was divided into two or more clans (*Khel*) and further sub-divided into *Tappa* or families (*Kor*). Although each tribe, *Khel* or *Kor* seemingly occupied the distinct geographical regions, their identity was linked to the tribe by

affinity rather than by a piece of land.^{viii} The various Afridi clans adhered to the *Samil* and *Gar* political factions. The Khyber Afridis were divided into six clans.

1. Kamar Khel
2. Qambar Khel
3. Kuki Khel
4. Malakdin Khel
5. Zakha Khel
6. Sipah.

The Zakha Khels had descended from Mussammat Zakhai. They were the most powerful and independent tribe among the Afridis. Their strength originated from the fact that all other Afridi tribes had to pass through their lands biannually during their summer and winter migrations. They themselves were almost independent in their migration except the Kamrai and Sipah. Notwithstanding their independence and influence, the Zakha Khels were the most notorious among the Afridis for their raids and robbery.^{ix}

The paper reflects the nineteenth-century British imperialist desire to subdue the Pashtun tribes, most notably the Zakha Khel Afridi tribe, along the North-West Frontier of India with a view to politically coax and militarily coerce them, by carrying out military expedition in 1908, thereby immersing them in the imperial power politics. In order to fill a gap in the existing knowledge on the theme, this paper employs historical approach with Empiric-Analytic reason as a tool.

British Government Relations with the Afridi Tribe

During the First Anglo Afghan war the British Government first came into contact with the Afridis when Khyber was the scene of many skirmishes between British Government and the Afridis. The Kuki Khel Afridi killed an officer of British Indian Army in a response to this aggression and a resistance was organized in January 1857.^x Some individuals of the Zakha Khel Afridis were detained by the British Indian Government on the charges of minor offences. The Zakha Khel tribesmen were released after entering into an agreement with the British Indian Government in August 1857.^{xi} By taking

service in the British Indian Army many Afridis helped the British Indian Government to crush the uprising of 1857.^{xii} In 1878, a force was sent against Afridis especially against Bazar Zakha Khel who harassed the passage of the British through the Khyber Pass. British Government regained the control of Khyber and Michni Passes under the treaty of Gandmak.^{xiii} An administrative unit known as the Khyber Agency was created in 1879 with Pierre Louis Napolan Cavagnari as its first political officer.^{xiv} In 1881, under a formal agreement executed with the Afridis Jirga at Peshawar, the Government of British India reserved the right of re-occupying the Khyber Pass and of collection of all tolls. In return for an annual subsidy they abstained from any troubles in British Indian territory.^{xv} During the tribal disturbances of 1897, the Afridis in August attacked the Khyber posts and also sacked the fortified *sarai* at Landi Kotal. To deal with Afridis, a force under Sir William Lockhart was sent to Tirah.^{xvi} By April 1898, the British Indian Government recovered a fine of RS 50,000 and 800 breach-loading rifles from the Afridis.

In October 1898, through a formal agreement the Afridis accepted to have no relations with any power except the British and not to have any objection to the construction of roads and railways through the Khyber.^{xvii} Yet, the Zakha Khel Afridis gang robbed and murdered Hindu *bani* of the Kohat District in September 1904. They entered the Peshawar district in 1908. They wore the constabulary uniform that they had stolen in a robbery. They also had 100,000 rupees which they had stolen from a Hindu band. They tried to rob a train on one occasion. They also tried to kidnap a British Assistant Commissioner.^{xviii} In February 1908, an Indian Army under Major General Sir James Willams invaded the Bazar Valley and ultimately forced the Zakha Khel Afridis into submission. An agreement was executed with the Zakha Khel and five other Oala Khel clans of Khyber Afridis by which they became sureties for the Tirah Zakha Khel future good behavior.^{xix}

Critical Analysis of Bazar Valley Expedition, 1908

This section gives an insight into the British

Indian Government strategy to deal with the upheaval caused by Zakha Khel Afridis, “the most truculent and powerful of all Afridi clans.”^{xx} Their continued raiding resulted in compelling the British Indian Government to send against them an expedition to the Bazar Valley of northern Tirah in 1908 which ultimately forced them into submission. The Bazar Valley expedition of 1908 was neither the first nor the last carried out by the British Government on its North-West Frontier. The penalties meted out were so common that from 1849 to 1899, the British Indian troops carried out at least sixty-two campaigns against the tribal people.^{xxi} Conversely, T.R. Moreman mentions more than fifty operations undertaken by the British army from 1849 to 1914.^{xxii} The main motive behind such expeditions was to castigate the tribal people for what the British government supposed to be their “accumulative crimes” like looting and theft.

For the British Indian Government, the control of the Zakha Khel Afridis was less amenable than other clans of Afridis partly because their trade with British controlled territory was small and partly because their settlements were a long way from the settled borders of British India. Among the Afridis they were most independent clan owing to the fact that all other Afridi clans had to pass through Zakha Khel lands when coming down to their winter settlement and when going back to their summer abodes.^{xxiii} As the Zakha Khel were inhabiting lands stretching from slopes of Safed Koh to the border of Peshawar, they were forcing their neighboring tribes to exorbitant tolls for the privilege of passing through their territories.^{xxiv} Imperial Gazetteer of India describes them as the most active thieves on the frontier.^{xxv} One of the Zakha Khel section, the Zya-ud-Din was regarded by Warburton as the most thieving community.^{xxvi} The explanation stated by the Zakha Khel themselves for their seemingly awful reputation was “The land in the Afridi country is very little and not at all sufficient for the maintenance of the people. There is no industry, trade or any other source of income in the country. The country is dry, mountainous with no production. These things were felt more

bitterly by the Afridis than other tribes who are comparatively possessing fertile lands.”^{xxvii}

Poverty certainly was the main cause of most Zakha Khel raiding pursuits but the location of their settlements was almost as vital a factor as the unproductiveness of their territory. The Zakha Khel controlled an immensely huge portion (about a third) of Afridi lands, and almost all this portion comprised of a one undivided bloc. This bloc was located 10 miles or more from administrative border with British territory to the east, and to the North-West bordered Afghanistan. Moreover, the Zakha Khel clan of the Afridi tribe did not migrate to the Kajuri Plain in the winter season but moved only within their own lands, barring a route over the Bara Valley to and from slightly small tract in Tirah Valley. However, one of the principal migratory routes used by the other sections of the Afridi tribe passed through the lands of Zakha Khel. In August 1857, the first agreement with Zakha Khels was documented by the British when Zakha Khel promised that on condition of free access to British Indian territory, they would neither associate with the enemies of the Raj nor harbor outlaws.^{xxviii}

Still in the spring of 1872, a blockade was enforced against the Zakha Khel and a reward of Rs 10 for each Zakha Khel arrested was offered but these measures had trivial results. The second Anglo-Afghan war forced the British Indian Government to carry out a punitive expedition into Bazar Valley which destroyed Zakha Khel’s standing property.^{xxix} In 1897 another expedition was made against the Zakha Khel of the Bazar Valley under Sir William Lockhart that destroyed all principal villages.^{xxx} The British Indian Government thought that the Afghan intrigues in 1902-3 with the Afridis was an undesirable development. The tribesmen made a visit to Afghanistan in response to the call of the Amir. An ex-malik of Zakha Khel, Khwas Khan turned out to be the major agent of the Amir regarding dealings with the tribe.^{xxxi} He was the one who had fled to Kabul after the 1897 disturbances. The British Indian Government considered him as the “open enemy of the British.”^{xxxii}

The Zakha Khel conducted raids on the British

Indian territory after their return to Khyber markets and villages beyond the jurisdiction of Khyber Rifles. They, armed with their Martini-Henrys rifles, were able to keep their pursuers at a distance because they carried the less powerful Sniders and Enfield's rifles. The rifles smuggled in through Afghanistan from 1906 onwards grew at an alarming rate, rising from 15,000 in 1907 to almost 40,000 by the time the British Indian army was preparing to launch a punitive expedition against the Zakha Khels^{xxxiii}. The insolence of Zakha Khel reached its climax in the year 1907 when the British Indian Government summoned the friendly Afridi clans to Landi Kotal to receive their allowances. The Political Agent of Khyber who was also the commandant of the Khyber Rifles removed the Zakha Khels from guest list because he thought that rewarding these outlaws for their criminal behavior would be an act of perversity.

A Jirga of Zakha Khels visited Landi Kotal and informed Ross-Keppel of their demands. They demanded that the process of reducing tribal allowances must be stopped. They refused to accept responsibility for raids. They demanded that all restrictions be removed on the members of tribe going to Kabul. Khawas Khan and his gate crashing Jirga was cursorily dismissed by Ross-Kepple. A large number of Zakha Khel visited Kabul in July and August 1907 and conspired with the Amir's brother Nasrullah, the leader of the anti-British party in Kabul, who not only increased their allowances but also provided them facilities for purchasing large number of rifles through the Persian Gulf. No sooner the Zakha Khel tribesmen returned to Tirah they made well organized attacks upon villages with British Indian administrative border. They fired at the detachments of troops and ambushed parties of Military Police.^{xxxiv} The British Indian Government patience was exhausted and it sent an expedition against the Zakhas Khel in the Bazar Valley of Tirah.

The main aim of the Bazar Valley expedition of 1908 according to a Political Report was to punish the Zakha Khel for their frequent raids on the boarder of Kohat and Peshawar districts.^{xxxv} However, the British Government was anxious that the punishment should be confined only to

the Zakha Khel and measures to be taken to isolate them in order to prevent the possibility of general uprising.^{xxxvi} With this objective in view they called Jirga of all Afridi clans except the Zakha Khel before the expedition. They also refrained them from joining the Zakha Khel and obtained from them such guaranties as would ensure their good behavior. Under the command of Major General Sir James Willcocks, the Zakha Khel were speedily coerced by the British troops in the Bazar Valley of Tirah.^{xxxvii}

However, inspite of the Zakha Khel fighting in a determined manner they suffered heavy losses. The forts of the Zakha Khel in the Bazar Valley were demolished and fodder and wood were confiscated. The maliks and elders of the other Afridi clans were pressured to the utmost to restrain the tribesmen in Tirah joining the Zakha Khel. They were successful as not more than fifty tribesmen from the other clans of Afridi tribe took part against the British government.^{xxxviii} The maliks and elders entered into negotiation with Zakha Khel only when they were satisfied that they could control their own tribesmen. Zakha Khel, however, were in constant receipt of messages from certain anti-British elements in Peshawar encouraging them to hold out as the British government had ordered withdrawal of the troops. Furthermore, large supplies of ammunition and flour were arriving daily at the Thabai Pass from Afghanistan. On 25th February 1908, the Afridi maliks and elders who had assembled in Sir James Willcock camp left to hold a consultation with the Zakha Khel at Halwa. The negotiations with the Zakha Khel lasted three days and nights and were constantly interrupted by the howls of hundreds of Afghans who clustered on the hills around, abusing the Jirga and calling upon the Zakha Khel not to listen to the 'Faringhi dogs'.^{xxxix}

Inspite of all these happenings a working arrangement was concluded between the Zakha Khel and other clans of the Afridis by which the Zakha Khel elders placed themselves unreserved in the hands of the Afridi representative and it was decided that the combined Jirga would settle the matter with the Political Officer. A force was seen advancing from the Thabai Pass on the

morning of 26th February, when the Jirga was about to start assembling, consisting of Afghans (mainly Shinwaris) led by groups of Mullas including some of the most influential in the Ningahar province.^{xi} The Afridi elders and maliks believed that they had been deceived and accused the Zakha Khel of treachery. However, the Zakha Khel swore that they had no knowledge of this reinforcement. The Zakha Khel elders went off to meet the Afghan force in an effort to induce them to return to Afghanistan. As the other Afridi clans did not place much confidence in them, four elders from each of the other clan accompanied them to guard against any double dealing.^{xlii} At last it was arranged between the Zakha Khel and the Afghans that the later would return to the Afghanistan and await the result of the negotiations. Their assistance would be welcomed if the negotiations proved unsuccessful. On 27th February 1908, eleven hundred men including three hundred Zakha Khel marched into the Political Officer camp.^{xliii} On (28th February) a draft agreement was arrived at which was approved by Sir James Willcocks.

The petition of the Jirga was read to Afridi tribes in Persian and explained in Pushto.^{xliiii} At the conclusion of the reading each tribal malik rose and formally asked the elder of his clan whether they authorized him to guarantee these terms on behalf of their constituents. The reply being unanimous Sir James Willcock accepted and signed the settlement on behalf of the government of British India. When the settlement had been signed the tribal elders sent messages to every part of the Bazar Valley to inform the Zakha Khel that peace had been made and that they could now bring back their families to home. They also warned them that if they discredited the settlement by firing at the troops the Afridi Jirga would attack them. Next morning on the 29th of February, the whole force marched to Chura. Except Zakha Khel elders all the members of the Jirga accompanied the troops. The Zakha Khel elders waited until the rear guard had left camp. During the march of 29th February to Chura, not a single shot was fired at the troops. It was a record in the history of frontier expeditions.^{xliv}

For subducing the Zakha Khel in the Bazar Valley expedition the total cost of Government came to 57,000.^{xlv} Material losses and sufferings made the Zakha Khel elders enter into agreement with the British government on 28th February, 1908. The agreement said that the other clans of Afridis would accept the responsibility for the future good behavior of every section of the Zakha Khel tribe. They were to deposit fifty-three rifles as security to the British government. The elders tried to convince the government that they would deposit the local arms whose market value was low.^{xlvi} The Khyber Rifles performed excellently and it was due to them that the British were successful in subduing the Zakha Khel. Not even a gun was lost in the expedition, and no soldier killed.^{xlvii} The influence and political skill of Abdul Qayyum Khan Assistant Political Agent, Khyber was also responsible for making a settlement between Afridis and British Government.^{xlviii} According to the Commandant Bazar Valley Field Force George Roos Keppel; Lieutenant Colonel Godfrey and the management by the Political Agent of Malakand of the Bajaur, Dir and Swat tribes during the expedition also contributed largely to the localization of disturbance.^{xlix}

John Lawrence vehemently advocated some display of power to serve as a double edged weapon: instill fear in tribes and keep them loyal to the agreements reached. He went so far as to suggest that dispatch of troops for exacting physical affliction was necessary for this purpose even if the tribe was not directly responsible for any transgression.¹ The British troops inflicted various forms of vengeance after they crushed the rebellion; they set the whole villages on fire, often burning houses and crops. They also seized other means of survival like cattle. After admission of defeat, the tribes were asked to compensate in the form of heavy fines and surrender advanced weapons. However, women and children were more prone to such ruthless measures than the actual culprits. The charred villages and crops meant starvation and unending sufferings for the innocent womenfolk and broods.

Davies observed that these measures were not

only ruthlessness but also fruitless and ineffective. He further contended that the government would never be able to make peace with the tribal people from Khyber to Gomal because it was out of the question to keep law and order in the region owing to their untamed natures.^{li} Yet most of the tribes proved incorrigible in the face of expeditions. Frere contended that instead of bringing about a positive change in the behavior of tribal people or heralding peace in the region, these operations ironically engendered hostility in the people.^{lii} The secretary to the government of India in the Foreign department considered very desirable that any Zakha Khel captured during expedition and who were known to have been implicated in raids would be tried and sentenced on the spot without the long delay which would necessarily ensure if prisoners were sent in exile to Peshawar without the difficulty of obtaining evidence on the spot.

The British colonial perception of the Zakha Khel Afridi tribe as the most active thieving community on the British India north-west frontier does not employ to the majority members of the Zakha Khel tribe. There was as a matter of fact an element of truth in it, as some Zakha Khel tribesmen were engaged in snatching cattle for ransom. However, the characterization was not applicable to the whole Zakha Khel clan. A thorough analysis of the statement of offences perpetrated and imputed to Afridi tribesmen reveals that greater numbers of the outrages was not serious but were of quite minor nature such as confiscating of animals for ransom. Many of the crimes were performed by individual tribesmen rather than the majority of the Zakha Khel tribe. Furthermore, many offences were committed by the Afghan outlaws operating from the Afridi tribal territory but were attributed to the Zakha Khel. As a matter of fact, many of Zakha Khel raids and offences were an act of hostility towards the British government military invasion of Afridi territory. The British Government perception that the Zakha Khel were robbers and most turbulent tribe endorsed the legitimization of punitive expeditions that vented the immorality of the British empire. The Bazar Valley expedition,

1908 was designed to be prompt and violent demonstration of power that validated colonial dominance and high handedness and presented an intriguing precedent of the reparation of resistance.

Conclusion

The British Indian Government held a distinctive perspective about their administrative and military enterprises in Afridi tribal territories. Apparently, such operations were launched to check the natural ferocity of tribal people and make them good workers. However, the government was severely criticized for its inhuman handling of the tribal people. The communal inflictions like setting the whole villages and crops on fire were deemed as dishonest and unethical and rather incongruent with British ideals. But the British Indian Government was in favour of meting out occasional castigations. From the Imperial perspective, though these punishments were not always effective, yet they implied certain benefits: the tribes were reminded directly or indirectly that they were not safe in their distant abodes; the government could hold them responsible for their offences even there. Expeditions also had symbolic significance as a means of demonstrating British resolution to control and rule. Furthermore, the British taught lesson to other unruly tribes by making an example of one. The British Government endorsed such campaigns by arguing that tribes could be better held and managed by use of force.

Sometimes intimidation proved enough, but more often military strength was made evident to achieve protracted effects. Nevertheless, British invasion of the North-West Frontier and their subsequent attempts to subjugate via intimidation and violence changed the face and fate of the British military. The whole framework of the British army had to be altered, not only to combat tribal insurgency, but also to be ready for the bigger threat, another imperial power Russia across the border. These campaigns also helped in shaping some of the calculated and pretentious military plans that formulated a forward policy into the neighbouring Afghanistan. The British

government justified military interference under the disguise of jurisdiction and law, hypocritically branding these expeditions as a judicial act. As a consequence, the tribesmen residing on the most remote fringes of the

subcontinent, were subjected to threats, penalties and military operations.

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