

Pathans in India

India has been attracting invaders, travellers and traders since the time of Alexander the Great. Every group had left its marks on the geography, history and culture of the country. The impact of some like the Mughals is very prominent in their monuments. The others such as Iran had left its legacy in the language and literature. One set of people whose marks are either not visible or little attention has been paid to them were by the Afghans or the Pathans as they are popularly known in India.

The word Afghans and Pathan is synonymous when we deal with the history of the sub-continent. I was told by many people in India that they were and still are considered as people of India. The mountains of the north and eastern parts of Afghanistan were in fact parts of the vast Indian land. Gandharan people are mentioned in Vedas and Mahabharat. Some people go offended when I asked where they came from because they thought that people always move from one place to another in India. Some tribes came as invaders or traders and others served in the armies of the rulers, whoever was on the throne. They were hired as soldiers, officers and diplomats by different rulers throughout the history of the last few centuries.

Moreover, the whole clans would follow from the mountains of Afghanistan and settle in the green pastures of India as refugees. Others would settle down and became part of that society, changing language and culture altogether.

Very little is known of the legacy of Pathans, living in remote areas and how far they kept their identity as a tribe. I had to choose only three areas because of the visa restrictions. My selection was Maler Kotla in East Punjab, Bhopal and Bihar on the North Eastern borders. I visited Rampur for Rohailkhand as it is the largest state with so many cities. The distances were great and I had only three months to complete my study.

What does the word Khan mean?

A general perception is that anyone with the Sir name of Khan means a Pathan or Pachtoun. The Indian film industry has always thrived on the actors with the family name of Khan and it was always assumed that their ancestors were Pathans. The Indian film industry has famous names with this title, such as Shahrukh Khan, Aamer Khan and Salman Khan. When a new film of these stars is released, people in Pakistan and in Afghanistan, watch it with special fondness. It becomes a matter of Pride for them to identify with their favourite stars as their kinsmen. However the reality is different.

The teachers and students of History and Social Anthropology in the Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi warned me to be careful with the word “Khan”. It was used as an official title by the Mughals to bestow

upon a Muslim similar to title of Rai to Hindus. The British followed the same tradition with the addition of "Bahadur."

Secondly, the title of Pathan is also used by those Hindu Rajputs who were converted to Islam. As they considered themselves superior to the other casts in India, they wanted a status after becoming Muslims. It happened that because the Pathans were a warrior people like the Rajputs and they were respected and feared for their bravery, they adopted not only the title of Khan but the clan names such as Yousafzais, Khattak and Afridi etc. It is interesting to know that the Pathans of these clans had no objection to this practice. During the course of my study, I talked to the Rajput Pathans as well.

The Caste System of India had its effects on Muslims as well and there are clear parallels which the Muslim Sociologist Aysha Sunbul, a student in JNU, told me to observe it from the titles. In Hindu Religion there are four castes.

As it happened the Muslims of India have unconsciously followed the same pattern by having four equal groups.

1. The sayyeds. The descendents of the Prophet Mohammad. (Brahman or priests)
2. The Pathans. The Martial race and the warriors. (Kshatriyas or warriors)
3. The sheikhs. Converts who till the land and are mainly in businesses. (Vaishiyas or traders)
4. The workers e.g. Barbers-cooks- Ironmongers etc.(Shudras or working class)

Bhopal

This Pathan state was founded by an Orakzai tribesman from the Tirah area in 1710/11. Dost Mohammad Khan was a soldier in the Mughal army of Aurangzeb. Mughal Empire was crumbling and the small states and their rulers were employing fighters to keep their fiefdoms. Dost Mohammad Khan became one of such warriors with a group of 100 Pachoons who earned their living by using their skill of swordsmanship and horse riding. He started capturing the areas around Bhopal in the middle of 18th Century and built strong forts to establish himself as the Ruler. Ever since he took over the area, the other tribesmen followed, lived in Bhopal and the practice stopped only after the Partition of India in 1947.

The story of Dost Mohammad Khan is not known to many Muslims living in Bhopal. But they know that the state was ruled by four women one after the other in the past 200 years.

The Women Rulers of Bhopal

Qudsia Begum	Regent and 8 th ruler	1819-37
Sikandar Begum	Regent and 10 th ruler	1844-68

Shahjehan Begum 11th Ruler
Sultan Jehan Begum 12th Ruler

1868-1901
1901-26

The state army of Bhopal always consists of the Pathans who were specially brought from the Afghan areas and they were given land and money at the time of their retirement if they wanted to settle down in Bhopal.



The Tomb of Dost Mohammad Khan in Bhopal

The whole of India was one big piece of land before the British left and people of different ethnic groups could move from one place to another as they do in any free country. Some families could speak/understand Pashto. The reason was that until a few years ago, most of them were able to travel to Afghanistan and Pakistan. There was a better communication at each level of the family and the children would be able to understand their parents' language. However this is not possible now and the women folk are not able to speak the language, although they understood what was being said.

Talaezar Khan who came from Bunair about 70 years ago was recruited in the state army of Bhopal. He has fond memories of the time of the last Nawab, Hamidullah Khan and his regent Abida Sultan. He is not well off and lives like the rest of the lower middle class families. There are many villages where the Pathan families are land owners and are working hard

on the land to keep a decent living. Some of the villages have Pashto names which have been localised due to different pronunciations Raisenn area.

Khandera and Nakhtara are two of them. The population of these Pathans in Bhopal is less than 5 % in each village on average. Nobody could tell me the exact figure though.



Taaleizar Khan spoke fluent Pashto

Traditions of Bhopali Pathans:

Traditional foods of Bhopal are no different from the rest of India, however the Pathans eat a lot of meat and they do not serve lentils to the guests especially in the villages. They prepare fried sweet pastry pieces called Ghonzakhi which is given to the bride when she goes to her in laws or someone is travelling far. They also prepare pancakes on rainy days or for the guests which are called “Waishallay” (called Cheelay in Bhopali Language)

Language

Talking to the Bhopali Pathans, I found that the older generation still speak Pashto and younger ones understand but speak Urdu. The children learn Hindi/Urdu and are not able to communicate. Interestingly, I found the following Pashto expressions in their conversation. Ghat (big or fat) used for a boy who was bigger than his age. Chilla (extreme cold) Pashto

word Tsilla, means frost. Vara Varrai, Vaarra Marrai, in Pashto it means meal for all, consists of big pieces of meat boiled in water and served with pieces of bread. It is eaten in a big dish and all eat from it using their hands. In some tribal areas it is known as, Sohbat or Pinda.

Bihar

I was always fascinated with Bihar for two reasons. Firstly, it had the famous Tree in Gaya under which Buddha meditated and second, it has the remains of Sher Shah Suri (1540 -1545) in Sehsaram, who took power from Mughals and ruled for 5 year until his death. He had left his mark on the Indian society and they still revere him. His Revenue system and Postal system are still followed in the 21st century.

The Pathan lands and villages are scattered all over Bihar and I concentrated only on the area where Sher Shah lived, which was mostly in and around Patna and Sehsaram. There is a district called Sher Ghati and villages in that area are reputed for having wild Pathans.



Tomb of Sher Shah Suri in Sehsaram.

Patna

There were many Mohallas inhabited by the Pathans in the old city. Some of them are named after the clans such as "Lodhi Kadrara" "Khattak Toli" and "Afridi Tola". There are two gardens named Kalo Khan and Mallo Khan after the commanders who came with Taimurlane when he attacked India in 14th Century. They are known to be the Pathans but no more could be found about them in Bihar.

A Sufi from Khaishgi Clan

Arzani Khaishgai came to Patna in the 17th Century and never went back. Some poetic work in Pashto language survived from him but nobody knew where he went. I heard the story in Peshawar beforehand that Arzani was a Sufi of the Roshania movement which started as a reaction to the Mughal King Akbar's new religion Din-e- Elahi in the 17th Century. Roshani was an advanced form of Sufism, going along with the Chishtia Tariqa. Their leader Bayzeed Ansari Urmarr from Waziristan fought the Mughals and was killed. Apparently Arzani went away with from Punjab 's Kusoor area on a mission to spread the word and never seen again in north India. It was Professor Abdul Khaliq Rasheed an academic from Afghanistan who found out about his shrine and first wrote about it in 2002. I visited the place with him and found the whole place around Arzani's shrine peaceful. I was told that two weeks ago, there was Arzani's Urs, and about 10,000 people came which is minimum. Between, 30 and 40,000 people come in good weather. The interesting thing is that there are two days of the Urs, one for men and the second for the women. On the second day, all the shops are run by women and no men are allowed. Shah Arzani did not marry and had no children, his successor of the Rochani Khankah is usually elected amongst the teachers of the Persian Department of Patna University. The present Sajjada Nasheen is Professor Haseen and he invited us to meet a group of Arzani followers in the Khankah . They have people of every religion attending their meetings and are quite relaxed about women presence on the shrine.

When I was about to leave the Khankah, I saw a group of women heading towards the Shrine singing traditional wedding songs. They were taking the bride to the shrine to have the blessings. This is a very old tradition followed in the tribal areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan. A day before the wedding the bride to taken to the local shrine by the women of the family.

Sehsaram and Sher Shah Suri's clan

Non of Sher Shah Suri's family members were ever traced successfully. His sons fought amongst themselves and the rest of the family perished after the Mughals took over. However the villages at the vicinity about 100 km from Sehsaram have fragmented population of the Pathans who carry their family names with them.

As far as the differences of the traditions, I could not spot many amongst the clans. The Yousafzais are perhaps more educated and joined the government services. The Khattaks and Shiranis work mostly on land. Their women folk are usually from their own tribe and they hardly marry outside the family. The Afridis are more open and they marry with other families, although the education level amongst them is not that high.

Jagdesh Pur Village:

About 80 km North West of Patna, this village had over 50 Pathan families. The total number of houses in the village is about 1000. The Pathans live close to each other and their Mohalla is known as “Pathan Tola” It was interesting to know that wherever there were Muslims living in an area in Bihar, there is bound to be one Pathan Toli or Tola (which means group) The head of Warsi family were most hospitable and the head of their family Iqbal Waris lives in Patna. The second brother Asad Waris took me to the old family home and there I saw some pictures in the Hujra which is being in decay for years.



An old picture of one of the ancestors of Waris family in Jagdeshpur

Some of the family traditions are still followed strictly.

1. When a child is born, they shoot in the air. Three shots for a boy and two for a girl.
2. The family has kept some of the swords and shields safe although they were in a bad condition.
3. The men shout outside the door when they enter their own house, so that if there are any women guests, they could cover themselves.

4. The family is strictly religious and they kept the men and the women quarters separate from each other.
5. At the time of the wedding, no demand is made for the Dowry and the boys family always present two gold coins in a plate at the time of the Rukhsati (bride leaving her parent's house) to the bride's family. It is usually given to the bride now.
6. A lot of meat is cooked at the wedding feast. Special meat with no spices is cooked in earthenware and is eaten with leavened bread baked on the Charcoal.

Maler Kotla

The capital of the state is also called Maler Kotla and it is situated at a distance of 28 miles to the South of Ludhiana and 36 miles from Patiala. It has a population of 100,000 and the total area of the state is 164 square miles. It is comprised of 213 villages and has rich fertile land, broken by sand drifts here and there. The Muslims are 65% of the population and 20% of them are of Pathan origin.

There are several myths about the city and one is plausible enough about Shaikh Sadruddin. He was a pious man from Daraband area (Suleman mountain range near Quetta) of Shirani tribe sometimes between 1430 and 1440. He settled in the village of present day Patiala living in a small hut praying and meditating and was considered a saint by the local people.

Behlol Lodhi (1451- 1517) the Afghan king who had most of the western parts of India under his control was on his way to Delhi with a force. He was caught in a sand drift and while there was nothing visible in the darkness, the King spotted a dim light of a lamp still burning in the wind. It was the hut of Shaikh Sadruddin and when the king found out, he came to the hut to show his respect and asked the holy man to pray for him to bear a son and have victory.

The king married off his daughter Taj Murassa to Sadruddin after he got the throne of Delhi, and also gave him the area of Maler Kotla as a dowry to his daughter. This happened some time between 1451 and 1452.

The descendents of Shaikh Sadruddin branched into two groups. One started ruling the state and they were given the title of Nawabs. The other branch lived around the Shrine of Shaikh Sadruddin became the Mujavirs and they control the revenues of the shrine. The local myth is that the compound wall of this shrine was built by Jinns overnight and they left it incomplete when they heard the sound of a stone mill or Maichan. A small stone mill is still placed on top of this wall.



The wall of Shaik Sadruddin's Shrine

Muslims and Sikhs live peacefully at present and there was never any ethnic violence since the partition. There are many mosques in the city and Call for prayer is heard on loud speakers at the time of the prayers. The level of education amongst the Muslim population is low in Maler Kotla, but those Pathans who do get education, usually join the government service. Their preferred field is Police and it happened that they are successful Police officers. Some of the Pathans are renting out their properties and a few of them are still keeping the old family business of rearing horses and selling them in the annual fairs of Punjab. Most of them are religious, and they send their children to Madrassas in the city where the boys and girls study. Children from the nearby villages also come to such Madrassas wher Quranic education is considered compulsory. There are schools and one for girls. For Post Graduation, they go to either nearby Patiala or Ludhiana college.

The Nawab's family in Maler Kotla:

Sajida Begum is the second wife of the last Nawab Iftikhar Ahamd Khan of Maler Kotla. I went to see her in the main palace which is in decay now. It was built at the end of the 18th Century, but every successor improved it. It is built of brick and mortar, with huge wooden doors and high ceilings. The original palace was surrounded by Green fields and it

must have been a grand place, but all the grounds have been sold now and new shopping plazas are being built.

I went to see her and in the big hall of the palace which is known as, " Sikandar Manzil" had an over powering painting of Nawab Sikandar Khan. Sajida Begum was once a member of the parliament but now she has retired and living a quiet life. There were paintings of previous nawabs on the walls but it was a sad place. I also tried to meet the first wife of Nawab Iftikhar Khan who is known to be " Tonk Wali Begum" but she was in a nursing home, too ill to see anyone.



Sajida Begum and Safia Haleem

Family Traditions:

Iqbal Shirwani told me that, rearing horses was done by his family in the past 300 years. But they never sold horses, though he started the business only to make a living. All the horses are named at birth and they are marked with the Shirwani seal.

Akhlaq Ahmad Khan is also from the same family and he is a famous advocate of the city. He is also holding on to some of the family heirlooms. In fact the Sword from his house is always borrowed by the other families at the time of the weddings

- The Kamees Shalwar is called " The Pathan dress "

- The traditional embroidered shoes are also called Pathani shoes by the local population and they are worn on special occasions.
- Pathan women strictly observe Pardah when they go out. They used to wear Burqas, but now they are using Shawls and big sheets of material to cover themselves.
- The Pathan married women spend the weekend

(Sundays) with parents. Her parents make sure that she is well entertained and there are plenty of meat especially Kabab and Tandoori Naan are cooked for her. This tradition continues until her death. In the absence of her parents, the brothers and their wives will keep this tradition.

Up until 1903, some Pathans of Maler Kotla did speak Pashto amongst themselves. Iqbal's grandfather could speak Pashto because he used to travel back to Peshawar. However it gradually died down and now Punjabi is the common language with Urdu spoken by the Muslims. There are 29 shrines of all sizes in Maler Kotla and most of the saints buried there came from Afghanistan. The Pathans respect and believe in the power of these saints. Iqbal Shirwani showed me an old photograph of his grandfather with a few elderly soldiers. They were the last remaining Pathans in their traditional ceremonial dress. His brother Ajmal copied the picture for me and here it is.



Rohail Khand

This name was used in the 18th Century to describe the people of India from its North Western mountains presently in Pakistan. The Rohillas first settled on the land between the rivers Ganga and Jamuna, known as Doaba. It is now the state of UP, the largest in India. This area was wild and uninhabited with mosquito infested marshes and flood planes. Pathans of various tribes settled in mud houses and became land owners. But it was not an easy ride for them and they had to fight many battles to survive. Slowly expanded along the rivers Pathan landowners formed a loose confederation of states known as Rohailkhand.

After the death of their leader Hafiz Rahmat Khan in the battlefield, the Rohillas were hunted down by the Mughal and the British and were subsequently scattered in the countryside. Later charges of destroying a nation (ethnic cleansing or genocide) were brought against Warren Hastings of the East India Company, in the British Parliament. About twenty thousand Rohilla warriors and over a million people became homeless. They became parts of armies in many states and some rose back in the 20th Century to play an important role in the modern day India.

We can name only one out of many, Dr. Zakir Hussain; the first president of the independent India who was from Afridi tribe.

It is important to note that Rohailkhand as a whole became the crossroads of trade routes from the North, North West as well as the East. The axis of the Mughal empire, the Grand Trunk Road, first built by Sher Shah Suri which had linked Bengal with the Mughal Capitals of Agra and Delhi & via Sirhind and Lahore eventually reached Kabul was completely redirected. During 18th Century the Eastern track shifted northwards entering Rohilkhand via Central Awadh and Farrukhabad. From there traffic could bypass Delhi altogether and continue either south to Jaipur and other Rajput cities or through Baraily, along the hills via Najibabad. The rout circumvented the Punjab & Delhi and Caravans could reach Peshawar and Kabul without touching Sikh territory.

Although the 21st Century Pathans in these areas are mostly poor, they are still living off their wits and courage, sometimes taking law into their own hands. Taking revenge is still common and on a few occasions, there were murders which even the police could not handle.

Rae Bareli, in Western U.P it is at the moment under the influence of the Pathan Peer Ali Raza Khan. He has a School of thought and has thousands of followers all over the world. As he is the vote bank for any

contestant of the election, all the communities respect him. His family has their own monastery in Bareilly and do not see women there. Farrukhabad has a mixed population of Pathans dominated by the Bangash and Yousafzais. In Qaim Ganj there are many Pathan landlords who do not do much and give their land to be cultivated by other communities. They keep guns and shoot at the time of the weddings or at childbirth.



Daughter of Dr. Zakir Hussain and granddaughter Neelofar with Safia

U.P Traditions

- *Orbal. The tradition of tiny plaits of bride's hair at the time of the wedding was common even a few years ago.
- *Boiled meat eaten with Nan bread. It is called Tar Tanoori.
- * Rampur knife industry was the pride of the town. Some knives are still being made and the young men carry them to show off. These days the same professional ironmongers are making good copies of the guns at a small level. These guns are used for hunting which is a pastime of the Pathans. Shannu Khan ordered a dozen knives for me to choose from and I took only the smallest one with a bone handle.
- *The Jirgah system is intact and for small disputes people do call a jirgah.
- * Snuff is used and special, elaborate boxes were in fashion but not now.

- * The youngsters kiss the hands of their elders.
- * They do not smoke or chew Paan (beetle leave) in front of their parents.
- * Until 1940s the white Burqa or shuttle cock like shroud which women of Afghanistan wear when they go out was common. Burqa was abandoned by many women of U.P 20 years ago but it is in fashion now in an Arab style, due to the Identity crises.
- * The first Thursday of the Lunar month is considered Auspicious and sweet dishes are prepared to send to the local shrine for the poor to eat.
- * A married woman should spend the first day of the new moon in her Parents house and she has to sight the moon there.
- * A pregnant woman should drink milk in the light of the full moon if she wants her baby to be fair skinned. On the sixth day after the Childbirth, the woman is taken out at night in the courtyard and she looks at the stars. If it is a cloudy night she must do it the next day.
- * At weddings, most of the traditions are common with the other U.P Muslims but Mahpara told me that when bride and the groom are brought together for the Ceremonies of the Mirror and Quran or Arsy Mashaf, an elderly lady of the brides family must pull her plaited hair before the groom looks at her face in the mirror for the first time.
- * Shalwar Qamees and Turban is a must for the men on special occasions.
- * If you don't eat enough meat, it is considered a lack of proper diet. Handay Ka Gosht (meat cooked in a clay pot) Tikka (small pieces of meat which is barbecued) are favourite dishes.
- * Some of the Pashto words are still used e.g. Patka (turban) Peshawari Chappal, Loopatta, Saaloo (shawl)
- * Pardah is strictly observed by women in the countryside

Poetry Charbait (Quartet) competitions

Pathans love poetry, especially in the epoch form. There is a special fascination for the night time gatherings. They are thrilled by the moon, go hunting or sit around the fire and recite poetry or sing and dance. Even now all the big events in the state happen at night. Singing Charbaita was a favourite of the warriors.

As the language is no more spoken, the Charbaits are composed in Urdu. The content of the poetry is usually a famous war in history of the area. There are Charbait competitions at night and they are called "Akhadas" All the poets who compose Charbait take part in these events and at the time of the Nawabs used to get valuable prizes when they won. These competitions are famous in UP. At these events the Rabab is also played which the musical instrument of the Pathans.

Libraries and literary works

Rampur Raza Library also known as the Taj Mahal of books. It was started as a personal collection of the Nawab Faizullah Khan in 1774. The succeeding Nawabs added to the collection and then Nawab Hamed Ali transferred it into his own Palace, Hamed Manzil. It has over 50,000 manuscripts and about 100,000 books. It is considered the largest library in India for Manuscripts. Khuda Bakhsh Library in Patna has also started as a personal collection of Maulavi Khuda Bakhsh. The person who enriched it and gave it a proper building was Dr. Zakir Hossa who was the governor of Bihar in 1961. Zakir Hossain bought manuscripts from private collection all over Bihar and donated them to the library. The Catalogues are excellent and in two minutes, I was given the Pashto Manuscripts to look at. There was handwritten Diwan of Qasim Ali Afridi and a dictionary of three languages including Pashto from the 18th Century.



CONCLUSION

My study was not academic and most of the time I made notes on what people was saying and what they believed in. However, as a journalist I had to separate myths from the facts. Most Pathans still keep some of their traditions, though lost the Pashto language. They still marry within their own tribe, check family trees. They are afraid of integrating in to the mainstream cultures and feel threatened of losing their identity. Where they have land and economically well off, they take part in politics

and seen as a reconciling force. I was told that there are second grade (Do number) Pathans who use the title of Khan for their own personal gains. It was interesting to find out the reasons for people to call themselves Pathans. Aysha Sumbul (Sociologist in Jawaharlal Nehru University) told me that there are three reasons for that...

- The word Khan symbolises a status and a glorified past.
- The Pathans had a good reputation in the Indian community and they are still influential. The Muslims feel insecure especially after the communal violence of the recent past.
- Muslims, who migrate from their birthplace, want a new and impressive identity in a new environment. They can not call themselves Sayyeds as they are afraid of adopting this revered title, so Khan is an easy option.

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