

Book Review

(Prof. Ali Abbas¹)

Robert Nichols: A History of Pashtun's Migration (1775-2006)

Oxford University Press Karachi, 2008.

ISBN: 978-0-19-54700-2

Pages: 266, Price: PKR 495

Robert Nichols, Associate Professor in History at the Richard Stockton College, New Jersey had an opportunity to remain and live with the Pashtuns for quite some time. This was in pursuit of the present work, the book under review. Learning and speaking Pashtu like Pashtuns is not an ordinary feat, particularly for people of the Western World, when people of Pakistan from regions other than North Western Frontier and Baluchistan find it difficult. Further, living in a culture which may be widely different in all traits of human life and entirety with deferent traditions and socio-religious norms, offer some times odd and challenging situations. Robert Nichols must have faced them with success which is yet another commendable achievement.

The book (Under review) contains six chapters besides preface and a conclusion. The first two chapters, being introductory, introduce to the reader his thesis and contents chapter wise. Perhaps he did not explain about materials for he banked mostly upon his personal interaction with the Pashtuns, in particular for his fifth and sixth chapters. The third and fourth chapters, which are an excellent projection of the Pushtun's activity in Northern India, in the eighteenth century, shall certainly prove an addition to the existing knowledge of the later Mughul period.

The author initiates his discussions on the Pashtuns from the birth of Pakistan although he traces back their immigration to

¹ *Former Chairman, Department of History, University of the Punjab, Lahore*

other parts of India from the advent of the Muslims in South Asia. The Pashtuns are a part of the Pathans living in the North Western Frontier Province and the adjoining regions of Pakistan in the tribal belt, as also in the Southern regions of Afghanistan. Since they had to face times and again invaders on India, they were, and still are, a sturdy, brave, and a fairly adventurous people. As a martial race they had opportunities to test and exploit their fortunes, occasionally against or in the camp of the invading army from times before the birth of the Christ (Alexander's invasion 326 B.C.). The area of North Western Frontier remained under severe threats during the rules of Kanishka. Chandara Gupta Mauriya and Chandar Gupta Vikramadita who were able to occupy a considerable part of Afghanistan, besides the whole of frontier region. The Ghaznavids, the Ghorids and the Slave Dynasty's re-occupation of the area, not-with-standing occasional Mongols threats, followed by a strong Pathan Kingdom in Delhi, lasting a little less than a hundred years, was enough for the Pashtuns to strengthen this hold in their homeland. And yet they were divided over tribal factions, fighting against one another for co-existence and survival. Pir Malhi helped them to settle tribe wise in the region (see Hal Nama Per. Mss, P.U. Library, Mian Shafi Collection) and the teachings of Pir Roshan (Bayzid Ansari) in the late sixteenth century organizing them politically which later on infused in them the spirit of Nationalism.

Robert Nichols has most impressively highlighted the Pashtun's role holding fiefs during these regimes, organizing revenue collections and administration and occasionally ruling smaller units, under Lodhies and Suris posing serious challenges to the Mughuls, hailing from Central Asia and capturing a vast empire in Northern India. However, it was the genius of Sher Shah Suri, a Pathan, which proved being the torchbearers in the Mughul administrative and socio economic reforms, besides their exceptional role in the expansion of the Mughul Empire.

Nichols rightly points out that the Pashtuns served the Mughuls with sincerity but they were not prepared to assimilate themselves in the pro-Iranian Mughul Culture. Even the Rajput influence which was so visible on Mughuls seems almost wanting in the Pathans. With the declining Mughul empire, particularly after Nadir's invasion (1739) most of the Pashtuns,

literally engaged as Mughul mansabdars or their agents, carved out for themselves several independent principalities in Katehr (Ali Muhammad Khan) the founder of the state, succeeded later on by Hafiz Rehmat Khan). Quaim Khan Bangash in Faurukhabad near Agra, and the famous Qamar-ud-Din Khan, Nizam-ul-Mulk, Asif Jah I in Deccan. This was besides a small Pathan state established in Tonk (Rajhastan). Rabert Nichols has well analysed the annexation of Raohilkhand by the Nawab Wazir (Shuja-ud-Daula) with the help of Warren Hastings, explaining the greed of the Nawab and the East India Co.'s Governor General. While examining all the details, including the causes of the impeachment of Warren Hastings, Nichols does not mention Mrs. Metcalf's influence on Warren Hastings, whom he had married on his way to India at the Cape of Good Hope. Her treatment of the Begums of Oudh was alike the mishandling of prosperous princely state of Haifz Rehmat Khan and she could not miss an opportunity of fleecing out the maximum from Rohilkhand and later on from Oudh. The so called mismanagement in the two princely states is nothing but an apology to justify English action. Their policy against Tipu of Mysore, Asifuddaula of Oudh and against the Amirs of Sind was not dissimilar.

Apart from Nichols excellent analysis of the Pashtuns adventures in Northern India against the Rajputs of both Mewar and Marwar States, the Marathas and the English (besides local Chieftains), the author has totally ignored, perhaps innocently, a movement in the North West and East of India which marked a lasting impact on the Pashtuns as a community. The religious movements of Bayazid Ansari, popularly known as Pri-i-Roshan and his counter movement of Akhund Darwaze, an orthodox successor and disciple of Pir Baba Syed Ali Tirmazi, had divided the Pashtuns between the Suharwadi maslak and the Naqshbandia order of the Puritan Creed. Failure of Syed Ahmad Shaheed's movement in Northern Western Frontier and the fall of Balakot in 1831 widely expanded the influence of the teachings of Syed Ismail Shaheed. The Jihadi Movement which initially began against the Sikhs (Ranjit Singh) and later on developed against the English continued unabated until the end of the Ambella Campaign. The Jihadis were defeated and a large number of the people involved in the movement were exiled to

‘Kala Pani’ (Indiman Island) after 1861. Nichols mentions this exile without any background except some Pashutns participation in the ‘Mutiny’, siding one princely state or another. Meanwhile the teachings of Shah Islamil Shaheed spread rapidly in the entire region and Dini Madaris (Religious Schools) had mushroom growth in the N.W.F.P. to prevent un-Islamic practices and cultural laxities from the society. This coupled with the adoption of Naqshbandi creed, political ascendancy and efforts leading to acquire it became obligatory without which enforcement of religious purity was not possible. It may not be incorrect to suggest that the Taliban’s rule over Afghanistan for which Sufi Muhammad had been sending reinforcements from Pakistan and the current Taliban revolt against Pakistan may be the continued process of the movement. Nichols also mentions Sufi Muhammad’s role in the Taliban movement without properly analyzing the background. This movement is still enjoying the support of some religious political parties with affiliation to Deoban School of thought including Jamaat-i-Islami. How far this movement touched the common life in Pakistan is still a virgin theme inviting some knowledgeable scholar to carry out a research. And yet Robert Nichols should have at least provided some details on this account in his book.

The author does mention some individual Pashtuns whether chieftains of their own state or working in a princely state joining the mutineers in 1857 against the English and their consequent facing execution after the fall of Delhi. Many of them tried successfully to escape abroad to seek opportunities of livelihood. Nichols also makes a note of it “... imperial officials proposed new forms of transportation out of India for prisoners. From the beginning of the 19th century, selected criminals had been shipped to prisons and confinements in the colonial straits settlement of Singapore, Penang (Prince of Wales Island) and Malacca”. After the mutiny crisis shipments from Madras and Bombay of rebels were sent to Indiman Island, popularly known to Indians as Kala Pani. (see Maulana Jaffar Thanessary’s account in Urdu entitled Kala Pani). Most of the immigrants to prisons outside India may be from amongst the Mujahidins after the Ambella Campaign. Many others may have been engaged for transportation of the prisoners.

Robert Nichols notes some explorations missions being carried out in Australia for which people from Sind, Baluchistan and the Frontier were engaged. The camels and manpower was being exported to Australia regularly for so many exploratory missions there. But his analyses of the Pashtun's migration to the Gulf States in particular Dubai, seems to be an extraordinary experience of his direct interaction with the Pashtuns who had served there for a little less or more than a score of years as unskilled labour in the buildings construction works or as taxi drivers. They, mostly if not all, returned with fortunes, after a hard miserable life, serving not to enjoy, both to save for a better future at home for themselves and their families. Some of them, Robert Nichols reports became landlords contesting Provincial elections and becoming M.P.As.

And yet there is another side of the story. Many Pahstuns working in the UAE had become victims of HIV/Aids and returned home with positive symptoms which they passed on, ofcourse unknowingly, to their spouses and children. It is said their number was in thousands, though the official figure reports, was only in hundreds. But Robert does not mention which particular labour class of the Pashtuns fell victim to this disease? The UAE government, ofcourse, could not manage their treatment for the Pashtuns, as other labour class, was usually engaged by private contractors, not obliged to undergo or respect international labour laws.

The last chapter of the book touches the effects of the international economic depression all over the world and its fallout: on the UAE and its labour class. The year 2004-06, had shown a spiral rise in the G.D.P. growth rate. The growing industrial network provided a demand to manpower hunt from Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. But the subsequent situation under economic depression, obliged to large scale retrenchment and deportation of the illegal entries, who earlier had been overlooked. All this seriously told upon the economy of the concerned countries which banked upon the foreign exchange remittances from the people, settled outside. In the Gulf itself, the labour unrest demanded better terms and conditions for labour class whether engaged officially or unofficially. To Robert Nichols even if the Gulf states could not be involved directly in the employment on the labour, yet they

could well manage the contractors to offer promising labour conditions for their welfare and prosperity. He concludes saying that the UAE government should enforce Global Labour Standards to better the labour lot and encourage the growth of industrial and infrastructure in the country.

The book is an interesting reading with lessons for people zealous for working abroad, illegally engaged, and consequently suffering.