

The Status of Women and Marginalized Social Classes: Pakistan's Pashtoon Society in Perspective



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Abstract: *The prehistoric code of conduct, morality, conscience, and reprisal, known as 'Pukhtunwali,' struggled to regain its prominence during colonial rule. However, women and lower social classes were continually denied their fundamental rights. In the patriarchal Pashtun society, women's role remained limited, despite the notable contributions of several women in literature, work fields, and administrative functions. Unfortunately, women were often disregarded, and lower social classes had no rights, even though they constituted the basic unit of society and contributed their labour to society's progress. This paper aims to examine the status of women and the marginalized social classes in Pakistani society. The article explores how these groups were denied their rights and how the lack of recognition of their contributions negatively impacted society. The paper concludes by highlighting the need to address these inequalities to create a more equitable society that respects all its members.*

Key Words: Pashtuns, Women, Lower Social Class, Marginalization, Patriarchy

Introduction

Invaders, nomads and merchants have fascinated towards India since the time of Alexander the Great. The culture, history, and geography reflect these groups of people; the Mughals were one of them who left a strong impression on the history of the Sub-Continent. Iran was the only Muslim kingdom that carried its legacy in its language, literature and culture. Afghans or the Pathans were the only unnoticeable group of people but played a thematic role in the Sub-Continent history, when we talked about these two words Afghans and the Pathans in dealing with history are synonymous to each other. Pashtoons are the descendants from the North West Frontier Province and Eastern Afghanistan. The geography along with the people of these areas is popular for the rough, coarse, and harsh characteristics of the lands and as well as of their behaviors. The territory of these Pashtoons is rocky, and mountainous and has a series of Passes of which Khyber Pass is very famous. This divided Pashtoon society in two significant ways. This sort of

habitat fragmented the Pashtoons into two groups: those who were left in these mountainous areas were called Tribals, and the rest moved towards the fertile plains. There are 15 major tribes, which comprise Shinwaris, Afridis, Shalmanis, Mullagoris, Wazirs, Mohmands, Urmars, and Mahsuds. All of them have different values. (Hussain, 2000). British Colonial rule could not control these tribes, but their own Pashtoons ruled them and had a strong hold over them. The living standards were different for Tribals and of the settled Pashtoons, there was not such a distinct difference between their lives. Pashtoons in settled areas lived their life on agriculture and another such type of businesses; and had an opportunity to get access of socio-economic facilities. Khyber Pass was the only primary route through which the foreign invaders or travelers entered the Sub-Continent from Central Asia, so the North West Frontier Province has an undeniable significance in the reshaping of history. Colonial rule was more suppressive in the North West Frontier Province compared to the rest of India

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because of the hidden potentials of the Pashtoons. British rule kept Pashtoons away from education, they did not want Pashtoons organized, and unified. They used North West Frontier Province as a buffer zone against Russia; the British were feared of Russian expansionism and; therefore tried to use Pashtoons against them (Easwaran, 1999). The Pashtoons were pressurized by the tactics of divide and rule to make them obedient towards the British, this was successful up to some extent but they were failed in subjugating them. In the plains, Pashtoons were banned more effectively as compared to the tribals, but Abdul Ghaffar Khan initiated organizing Pashtoons and started constructing schools to make them aware politically and socially. That's why he was banned and tortured by the British to stop his struggle and was jailed for many years of his life but they could not stop him from his extensive services.

The Pashtoon Woman

In Pashtoon society, man is considered as the

head of the family and of the society as well. He has command over the rest of the family members, especially women, they have to obey him in every aspect. Today society has transformed to some extent because of the education and awareness given by their visionary leaders. There are many Pashtoon girls and women who are doing their duties globally and regionally. But here we are taking into account the society of Pashtoons before the partition of the Sub-Continent the era of 1929-1947. Several feminine names are sparkling on the pages of history, who contributed in literature, work field, administrative functions, and many more. But generally, women were the neglected gender in society. At that time there was no concept of women's rights not even of lower social class that was a dark time of Pashtoon society. In Pashtoons men are considered to be the controller of every situation and women in no way could be equal to men. Men-dominated societies always try to subjugate or overpower women in every field of life and didn't allow women to speak or gave any opinion on any issue. At home they have no say in any issue; men controlled and run the affairs of the home. Women were not allowed to give their opinion, they were submissive to men. When a woman gave birth to a female child the whole family mourned the birth and that behavior continued until her death. "I worked with my husband in the field for many years but never got any recognition from my family members or my husband. We had to leave our

children for many hours and worked in fields side by side with our men, it was not only in my case but it was a general custom that women had to work with their men" (Nisa, 2017).

Pukhtunwali was another constraint of society on women's rights, all of the members of the Pashtoon society had to obey this code of conduct. In case of violation, they had to bring disgrace to themselves and to their family. Pukhtunwali clearly expounds the position of women, her role in promoting the society and her family, their activities, where she may go and with whom all these should be followed under this code of conduct, can't be denied or violated. Any resistance or opposition to this code may result in the penalization of the woman and ultimately in her death. Women were not allowed to speak or communicate with a stranger (Mirza, 2008).

"When it comes to my marriage consent issue, I was kept unaware of the decision of my father and was got engaged to my cousin. It's not about me it was a common trend that girls had no opinion in their marital issues. If beaten by their husband she had to bear this because it was her fate. In our family, many of our cousins were beaten by their husbands but they were not allowed to protest, if she left her in-laws and went to her father's home, brought back by the Jirga, and endured all the sufferings (Saman, 2017).

The Pashtoon society is a male-dominated society, in which women have no such strong or respectable position, the wife remained subordinate to her husband throughout her life. Instead, the mother got a respectable position in the family; she is honored and obeyed by her sons and especially by her daughter-in-law and had a very strong hold over the family. The status of women in Pashtoon society could be judged by the famous proverb that is "there are two appropriate places for a woman, one her home and the other is her grave". The birth of a baby girl was the worst phenomenon of society and was welcomed by tears and in a mournful way. It was commonly believed that a man with many sons can resist his enemy, and a man with many daughters was considered weak in every situation (Shah, 2007).

*"You are Adam me the Eve; I am from you,
Then why you are so careless about me.
The birth of a baby girl is mourning for you,
Again and again, you are cursing your fate, why is it
so?*

*Both daughters and sons are yours,
Then why you are happy on one's birth and sad on the
other" (Sahiba, 1945).*

It was a common custom that Pashtoon gave a sword to their sons at a very young age to withstand their enemies; this practice replaced the pen with the sword. Their sons remained uneducated and for the daughters, it was out of the question to get an education. They hate the English language, and were unwilling to send their children to schools or to teach them a foreign language. That's why the Pashtoon nation was backward and had a very minute literacy rate. For girls it was forbidden to write or learn books even in Pashto, if they do so they would never respect the code of Pukhtunwali. "I read Pashto books with my mother but when my father was out of home or town because he didn't allow me to read or learn. Gradually I learned to read and write the Pashto language and after some time, when understood our (girl's) position in society I started writing. I wrote many poems about a Pashtoon girl's sentiments and the sacrifices which she was giving on daily basis. But all of my writings until now hidden treasury of wealth; I didn't show or discuss it with anyone even not with my husband" (Begum, [2017](#)).

Status of Women as Represented by Islam

If one analyses the pre-Islamic and Islamic status of women in every aspect, a slight change in their position can be noticed. Islam is the only religion that gave rights to every citizen, especially women and considers women as the essential being of society. In the pre-Islamic era, women in Arab were treated like animals. That was the period of ignorance, people kept women in subjugation. In wars, women were usually used as bondmaids by enemies. Women were exempted from any kind of social activity or political affairs of society. In that period of ignorance, blood feuds continued among the tribes for many years. Male members were required to defend their tribe and considered the strength of their families, therefore great importance was given to men than women.

When the light of Islam started to spread in the desert of Arabia, in one blow it banished all the injustices. Islam recognized all the rights of women including financial, social, political, and public. The Holy Quran addressed both men and women equally and interpreted them as the essential part for the survival of society. Islam gave full protection to women and recognized the legal status of their rights. The right of inheritance was first described by Islam. The Prophet Muhammad established practical examples by giving every single right to women. With the passage of time, people forgot the true essence of Islam and the slogan of women's rights disappeared in the background.

Women are not aware of their rights; they got this message from the behaviour of society, that they are inferior to men. However, Islam gave equal rights to both men and women. No one is superior except on piety, women are free in their life decisions. But they are bound by the psyche of their family and society (Bhattacharya, [2014](#)).

The Situation of Women in Pakistan: Gender Concerns

Pakistan, a country that came into being in the name of Islam, had Islamic laws prevailed and ruled the country. But there are certain rules and regulations from which people deviated intentionally or unintentionally. As its name "Islamic Republic of Pakistan" revealed that every law should be according to Islam and shariah, but there are certain customs and traditions which are against Islamic laws. Women are bound by cultural patterns; they can't exercise their legal rights. Pakistan's laws failed to deliver justice, "Jirga" and "Panchayat" the two judicial systems worsened the situation, they do every effort for male dominance (Manzoor, [2012](#)).

The set standards of society affected the social status of women. They can't raise their voice against violence, because he would be her father, brother or husband. She bears violence and gets threats of violence at home, workplaces and even on the streets. One of the main hurdles of women's empowerment is the perception of mal about them. "Ghag" or forced marriage is a common practice in Pashtoon society. Ghag means that a person claims the hand of a woman by force without her and her family's consent. The Government of Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa passed an act in 2013 for the elimination of "Ghag". Honor killing is another dilemma of Pashtoon society. Women accepted the way they are treated; they seldom interrogate these limitations put on them by society or religion. They lived in silence and have no choice or decision power in their life, moved around in veils therefore bound by the "Parda" system. In tribal areas of the Province selling Bride is a common custom. The girl is sold to a person irrespective of his age or other qualification but he could pay a high price. Dowry death is another evil of existing in Pakistan; the rural areas of the Province are more plagued from this evil.

Social Marginalization in the Sub-Continent

When Muslim rule was established in India (1206), the society was divided into separate groups; Migrants and Citizens. These migrants were further divided into

different nations including Turko-Mongols, Persians and Afghans. These groups of people emerged as the Elite class the masses were those people who newly embraced Islam. The Muslim society had four different classes; the Ulema, the Aristocracy, the other Spiritual groups and the Masses. Aristocracy included two categories, one comprised of Khans, Maliks, Nawabs and Amirs. The other category was of Military ranking. Similarly, the spiritual groups encompass the Pirs, the Theologians, the Sayyids and the Ulema.

Masses of the Muslim society were the common and ordinary people. They provided their services to this Elite and ruling class. Many of them were slaves, including both genders male and female. After some decades the system of slavery vanished but the societies were marginalized by this ruling class, on the basis of financial and status difference. These marginalized classes were ruled by the Aristocrats. Children of the lower class had no right to education because all the Madrassahs were in the patronage of the Elite class. Most of the educational Institutions were situated in urban areas, therefore were very far from rural areas, and Muslims remained uneducated because of no access.

When the two states got independence in the Sub-Continent the situation of the societies remained the same. Marginalized classes existed and were neglected in every Province. In the North West Frontier Province there were marginalized classes and they were treated the same (Kiran, 2008).

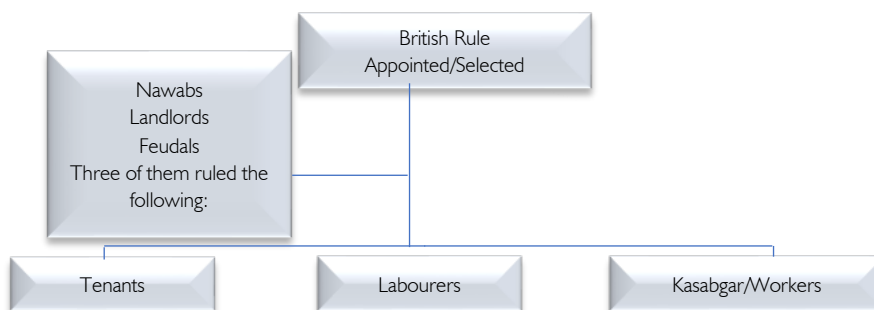
vehement, immobile, and threadbare by, discrimination, disputes, factionalism, lack of social assistance, and plain illiteracy (Banerjee, 2000). The society was divided into two classes an upper-class Feudal and Nawabs while the other was a low class comprised of Kasabgar (Naaye, Lohar and Tharkanrh), Laborers, Farmers and Mullahs. This lower social class was the main running body of society but was deprived of every facility of life. As we all know from history that 'Pukhtunwali' was the prehistoric code of conduct, morality, conscience and reprisal, and was struggling to revive itself in Colonial rule. British helped and created a landlord system that they would act accordingly as directed by their Masters and would serve as indirect rulers, quickening the decaying process of the Pashtoon's traditions. This indirect ruling system was so operational and effective that the local rural people didn't realize that they are ruled by the British; instead, they thought of their landlords as their Masters. Such a system of landlordism was created that needed wealth and men to get some established status in society, that's why landlords hired all the needy and poor class to increase their manpower. They succeeded in getting hold of society the tenant's class put all of their efforts to amplify the status of their lords. The British also employed the Jirga system to manipulate in the veins of society, was the most effective tactic of that time because all the Jirgas were headed by these landlords. Jirga was playing the three roles as administration, police, and of equity. It served as a peacekeeping authority during mobocracies, the Jirga was the sole authority to settle the dissensions and to deliver justice and equity to every common man. The body of Jirga consisted of elder persons of the Pashtoon's society, and there qualification was knowledge, character, and experiences of life (Banerjee, 2000).

Status of Marginalized Social Classes in Pashtoon's Society

Pakhtoon society was transformed into a colonized,

Figure 1

Shows the Marginalized Classes under the Dominance of British Rule.



"We were the underprivileged class of society and were kept away from education so we could not understand the tense situation of that time. As a result our people opposed education and our forefathers gave stressed on our religious education. It was the dawn of the 'Tehreek e Pakistan' that people stood against the merciless behavior of the British, that was the time in which Abdul Ghaffar Khan rose his majestic voice and our people named him Bacha Khan" (Allah, [2017](#)).

Pashtoons have a scorching desire for self-determination and have a legendary history of fighting and were famous for making guns of all types. British were defeated almost on every land of FATA; they give them the name "the Grim". Colonial rule diverted their attention from the tribal belt towards the plains and settled areas and started their ruthless deeds toward Pashtoons (Easwaran, 1999). For Pashtoons, education prospects were sternly restricted and they have no access to schools because there were no schools in the North West Frontier Province. Mullahs have a strong hold on the Pashtoon society because of the illiteracy could not understand the significance of education and remained in the false beliefs of these Mullahs. They constantly preached in their 'Khutbas' that if they send their children to schools they would be punished for this and go to hell.

Abdul Ghaffar Khan frequently highlighted this situation that Pashtoons are intentionally kept aloof from education and hence they were the most backward people in India. And he was also of the view that when Islam reached India it has lost its original

spirit and soul because it was welcomed by these fake Mullahs (Khan, [1969](#)).

On the orders of the British these Nawabs gave severe punishments to the locals, who supported the Khudai Khidmatgar Movement, jailed them, and seized all their properties. "I was myself punished by the British sank my head in water pots, for supporting and joining Khudai Khidmatgar Movement. They flicked me hard for my views about the British government, imprisoned me for one year but then released me. It was the Khudai Khidmatgar Movement that upsurge the low caste from the abyssal of humiliation and gave them their very due rights" (Khel, [2017](#)).

Conclusion

Pashtoon has a glorious history, having the important strategic location of their Province named North West Frontier Province. When the British came as an Imperialist in this region they showed a different attitude towards the Pashtoons because of their past history. Kept them in a solitary state from the other provinces and didn't introduce any kind of reforms, because of this discriminatory behavior the society of Pashtoons turned into a dark, illiterate, and uneducated society. They were unaware of their rights that's why were suffered by the implanted Nawabs and Khans. Today society has transformed up to some extent because of the education and awareness given by their visionary leaders. There are many Pashtoon girls and women who are doing their duties globally and regionally.

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