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**Colonial intrusion and Pakhtun resistance**

The new gem from Akbar S Ahmed is a compiled and edited publication of two apparently unrelated, but subtly interlinked manuscripts: A set of Pakhtun proverbs (Mataloona) and a Resident Administrator’s monograph on British government relations with the Mahsud tribe of Waziristan (Mizh).

The disjuncture is at the level of form. Mataloona is a set of proverbs about the way life is for Pakhtuns. It has integrity of thought and action, a beauty in the universal significance of their idiom. By contrast, Mizh has the cold logic of colonial administration. It describes the repeated attempts at a stick and carrot approach to make the Mahsuds acquiesce to colonial power. Yet, at the same time, the report implies the futility of such attempts in the face of Pakhtun resistance.

What connects the two manuscripts is the consciousness of the Mahsuds: the serene wisdom of the Pakhtun tradition embodied in the Mataloona and a fierce defiance against the colonial intrusion that arises precisely from that tradition and is narrated in the Mizh.

The Mataloona and the Mizh therefore, in their different forms, evoke the Frontier. This Frontier is not just geographic, but existential. It is an interface of two worlds. The world of the colonizer, wherein he strives to dominate and control; and the world of the Pakhtun community that affirms its historical consciousness through resistance to the colonizer.

The Mizh candidly acknowledges the colonial endeavour: “The custodians of civilisations dealing with barbarians…”. The colonial aim of dominance is predicated on colonizing the mind of the people they seek to subjugate. Setting up a system of political control and economic extraction in India required transposing into the psyche of the colonized people the colonizer’s image of them as inferior creatures. But this involved a rupture of the community from their own history, from the reference points in their consciousness through which they experienced their dignity, their creativity and passion for freedom.

Unlike some of the elites of the settled areas of the Subcontinent, the Pakhtuns with their tribal sense of equality and the living connection with their history resisted the colonial intrusion from the outset. The Pakhtuns, through the quietude of their wisdom and ferocity in combat, defied the attempt to colonize their minds and control their society.

Evelyn Howell, Resident of Waziristan and author of Mizh, states the Mahsud argument with a rare depth of understanding: “A civilisation has no other end than to produce a fine type of man. Judged by this standard, the social system in which the Mahsud has been evolved must be allowed immeasurably to surpass all others. Therefore, let us keep our independence and have none of your ‘qanun’ and your other institutions which have wrought such havoc in British India, but stick to our own ‘riwaj’, and be men like our fathers before us.”

Being men involved not only upholding the Pakhtun tradition of valour in battle but also deploying their intellectual power when dealing with their British protagonists.

Howell the Resident, mindful of the intellectual prowess of the Pakhtuns, combined with their skill in battle, observes by way of an epitaph to the colonial enterprise in Waziristan, “The Mahsud colonisation scheme continued to be a failure and, by the standards of those times, a costly failure.” He then analyses the colonial failure to subjugate the Mahsuds, and one of the reasons he proffers, is their power of intellectual argument: “The Mahsud being still unsubjugated, it falls next to consider the other reasons which make him no less difficult to deal with on planes other than that of force… his amazing plausibility in argument, such as would excite the envy of an Athenian demagogue.”

The tribal tradition of equality was so deeply rooted in the consciousness of the Pakhtuns that this norm was brought to bear in dealing with the British, without regard for the consequences. Howell in the Mizh notes this trait with grudging respect, “The famous Jaggar, Abdul Rehman Khel, once said to me, ‘Let it be “field” and blow us all up with cannon or make all eighteen thousand of us Nawabs’.”

The strength of Howell’s monograph on the Mahsuds, as indeed Akbar Ahmed’s introduction to it, lies in the fact that both grasp that “complex of mental attributes,” the consciousness of the Mahsuds, that led to courage in the battlefield as much as ingenuity on the negotiating table. These two forms of consciousness cross the bounds of form to give meaning to the metaphor that Akbar has created in juxtaposing Mataloona with Mizh.

Akbar S Ahmed in his profound foreword to Mataloona, notes that, “to know a people, listen to their proverbs and poetry”. One could perhaps add that a people also know themselves through their folklore and their poetry. The literature of a people contains the archetypal images that represent their deepest experience of being in this world. These images are part of what Carl Gustav Jung calls the Collective Unconscious and influence the way a community apprehends the world at any one moment. Hence, they shape the choices through which a people make their own history.

Sir Olaf Caroe, in his preface to the Mataloona has provided a practical insight into the relationship between the proverbs of the Pakhtuns and the consciousness that influences their interactions with others. Caroe learned from his Pashto language teacher, Qazi Rahimullah of Abdara, that “. . . an ability to quote the apt matal–proverb is one way to the heart of the Pakhtun.” Sir Olaf experienced the validity of his teacher’s observation when facing an angry Mohmand Jirga at Shabqadar. He noticed that their scowls turned into smiles when reminded of the Pashto proverb, “…patience is bitter, but its fruit is sweet.”

Akbar Ahmed has gone into the depth of the proverbs. He has compiled and brought out their universal significance by quoting similar proverbs from world literature. For example, the proverb, “God in the mouth, but theft in the heart”, is remarkably similar to Akbar’s quote from Shakespeare, “A fair face, a foul heart”. Again, the Pashto proverb, “One ear of corn in the hand is better than a pannier full a year later”, parallels the quote from Cervantes, “A bird in hand is better than two in the bush”.

The significance of our present actions becomes apparent only in the future, when they merge into a past that is irredeemable. This is expressed in the Pakhtun proverb, “Water that has passed through the dyke will not return”. Akbar finds an echo of this truth in Omar Khayyam: The past cannot be recalled./One thing is certain, that life flies;/ One thing is certain, and the rest is lies;/ The flower that once has blown forever dies.

The universal nature of the Pakhtun proverbs in Mataloona that Akbar Ahmed’s scholarship has brought out has perhaps another implication. This is to do with the subject-object relationship. Could it be suggested that our consciousness is the means through which humans integrate their observations, memories and imagination to experience the world. It is a particular way of knowing and while being uniquely subjective, can be validated by other human subjects. Hence, Hegel’s view that objectivity is subjectivity universalized. The undeniable similarity in the proverbs of different cultures across the world provides evidence for this proposition.

Finally, there is the question of our relationship with the heart and the existential choices based on this relationship. Consider the Pakhtun proverb, “Where your heart goes, there your feet will go”. This is the thought of a community that is linked with the heart. What then is the meaning of the heart which beckons us and gives direction to our journey. Martin Lings, the famous Islamic scholar and Sufi Shaykh, has pointed out that the heart is not just the organ by that name, but the centre of our consciousness. In both the Western and Eastern intellectual traditions, he argues, the “heart is the instrument of experiencing the transcendent”. Shaykh, Professor Hossein Nasr, suggests that the heart is the “site where the human and the divine meet”. He argues that the centrality of the heart to the human state is pointed out in the Bible as well as the Quran and both speak of “heart-knowledge”.

In Judaism too, the heart is associated with the inner soul of man. The idea of combining reason with our faculty of experiencing higher truths in a direct and unmediated fashion, is present in all the major intellectual traditions of the world.

So, the Pakhtun wisdom of the feet following the call of the heart forms part of the perennial intellectual tradition. By contrast, the post-enlightenment Western materialist tradition excludes the possibility of experiencing the transcendent and hence divorces knowledge from the heart.

Unmindful of heart knowledge, the colonial conception of power as control was devoid of compassion. Within that framework, power was used to manipulate minds and oppress societies. But the Pakhtuns resisted colonisation with the strength of the arm and wisdom of the heart. This truth emerges with compelling clarity in Akbar Ahmed’s powerful presentation of the Mataloona and the Mizh.

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