

Pathans

Profile

Of the estimated 21 million Pashtu-speaking people in Pakistan (who are known as Pathans or Pakhtuns), the vast majority inhabit the plains of the North West Frontier Province, while a minority of 2.2 million live in the highlands of the semi-autonomous Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Substantial numbers of Pathans have settled in Baluchistan; up to 20 per cent of the total population of that province is comprised of Pathans. Due to migration to urban areas there are probably over 1 million Pathans living in greater Karachi. Pathan is a Hindi term adopted by the British for Pakhtuns. The racial composition of the Pathans is less than clear. The tribes who lived in the area during the days of the Greek historians are believed to be part of the great Aryan horde that had moved down from Central Asia a millennium earlier. Over the centuries, the Greek, Persian, Turkish and Mongol invaders who passed through the region have added their blood.

NWFP's non-Pakhtuns

Nearly one-third of the population of the current population of NWFP is non-Pakhtun. The non-Pakhtun population consists largely of landless artisans and peasants who are mainly Gujars and Awans by caste. In the Tribal Areas, they are called *Hamsaya* or *Kadwal*. In the border areas of Hazara and Derajat, social norms resemble more closely those in the Punjab and Kashmir. *Biradaris* or clan groups remain important, but mainly as social networks, particularly for marriage. Chitral has a separate language and culture of its own. One of the main differences, clearly visible when one crosses over from Dir (into Chitral), is that carrying of firearms is less common.

The most distinct people of the NWFP, and arguably of Pakistan, are the Kalash, now confined to three small valleys in Chitral. The Kalash can be termed 'indigenous' by any definition of the term. Their way of life is rooted in the worship of ancestral spirits and trees. Their unique customs attract a lot of tourists. However, due to the conversions of the Kalash to Islam, their age-old traditions are fast becoming extinct. The Kalash form an ethnic, linguistic as well as a religious minority community. This overlap heightens their distinctiveness as a group compared to the overwhelming majority in the country and even their immediate neighbours, the Chitralis. Since the religion professed by the Kalash is different from the Judaic religions, (i.e. Judaism, Christianity and Islam), they are termed 'Kafirs', which implies non-believers (in the sense of not belonging to one of the revealed religions).

Language

About 68 per cent of the households in the NWFP speak Pashto as their first language, 18 per cent are Hindko speakers, while Seraiki is the mother tongue of just 4 per cent. Around 8 per cent of households speak local languages, such as Kohwar in Chitral district, while Urdu-speaking and Punjabi-speaking migrants account for only 2 per cent of the households. With the exception of Sindh, Islam came to the NWFP earlier than to any other part of South Asia. Since Pakhtuns received their religious instruction from Sunni Turk dynasties, the majority are Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi School. Non-Muslim

minorities form less than 0.5 per cent of the population.

Historical context

Pathans have an ancient history, culture and tradition often identified with the 'Pakti' kingdom as described in the writing of the classical historian Herodotus. Pathan culture and tradition were established between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, and Pashtu folklore was ingrained and Pathan nationalism subsequently reinvigorated by the lyrics of Khushal Khan Khattack.

Pathans have a political history beset with internal strife and intrigue. Internal feuds in the Pathan-dominated Afghan regimes of the nineteenth century provided an opportunity to many outsiders, and finally the British, to interfere and subsequently divide the Pathans themselves with the establishment of the Durand line in 1893. Pathans refused to accept this boundary, and Pathan nationalists point out that it divides a 'people' with a common tradition and history, and continues to deprive Afghanistan of an access to the open sea.

By 1946, immediately prior to the partition of India, M.A. Jinnah had a stranglehold on the affairs of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP); however, controversy is still generated when some Pathan nationalists highlight the fact that the referendum that had been organized by the British, and that led to a 99 per cent vote in favour of joining Pakistan, could not be regarded as conclusive. They point out that the referendum did not give Pathans the option of union with Afghanistan, being limited to union with either India or Pakistan, and that a significant proportion of the Pathan population boycotted the referendum. It is equally clear that the creation of the Pakistan state was opposed by the Afghans, who consorted with the Indian National Congress before partition and were led to believe they would gain the port of Karachi if the Pakistan movement failed. Such anti-Pakistan groups as Ghaffar Khan's Khudai Khidmatgas wanted a homeland for Pakhtuns, to be named 'Pakhtunistan'. The Afghan leaders appealed to the ethnic sensitivities of the Afghans and urged the inhabitants of the NWFP to join Afghanistan when it became clear that the British departure was imminent (LINK see Afghanistan).

Creation of 'tribal' areas

Many aspects of old British policy towards the Pathans have continued in post-independence Pakistan. Although the princely states of the NWFP area were abolished, there continue to be eleven designated 'tribal' areas. These 'tribal' areas retain considerable ethnic autonomy; central and provincial laws do not apply, and they are ruled by customary laws and the Frontier Crimes Regulation. After the initial period of indifference to the socio-economic policies of the NWFP, the affairs of the government became highly centralized under Ayub Khan (1958-69), with West Pakistan amalgamated into one unit, which resulted in minority disaffection. After the secession of Bangladesh, the provinces were reconstituted, and the 1973 Constitution guaranteed considerable provincial autonomy - although in practice power was centralized even more than in previous years. The highly centralized form of government continued during the eleven-year rule of General Zia (1977-88). The Zia government was initially wary of asserting its influence in the NWFP, but the Soviet military occupation of Afghanistan led to increased attempts to control the 'tribal' areas, most notably in 1985-86, with regard to heroin and arms smuggling. The presence of large numbers of refugees from Afghanistan (largely Pashtuns) also contributed to destabilizing the area. Over 3 million Afghan refugees came to Pakistan, 75 per cent to the NWFP, with a special impact on the 'tribal areas', where one out of three of the population were refugees. Apart from humanitarian and economic considerations, the refugees posed a security dilemma, as Afghan resistance groups operated from Pakistan, and *mojahedin* fighters moved freely across the border.

The economy of the NWFP is weak. What little industry exists is concentrated in the regional capital,

Peshawar. Economic development is generally welcome, but some Pathan leaders have attempted to impede road construction, as this would erode their own autonomy. Large amounts of opium are produced in Pathan areas and are an important economic factor; the government of Zia-ul-Haq attempted a massive crackdown on opium production and consumption, with little success. There has also been severe class conflict between landlords and tenants among Pathans.

Impact of US attacks on Afghanistan

Despite the return to democracy in 1988, the political situation in the NWFP remained fluid. Successive provincial governments found it difficult to stay in power. Continuing political instability, and dissatisfaction with the administration of justice, and with the government's foreign policy in relation to Afghanistan, were reflected in such incidents as the revolt of Pathan Islamists in Malakand in November 1994 in which at least 200 people died, as well as the bomb blast of December 1995 in Peshawar that resulted in the death of 21 people. After General Pervez Musharraf's military coup in 1999, general elections were held for the first time in October 2002. Notwithstanding a closely scrutinized election, the military government's support for the war on terror, and favourable policies towards the United States, antagonized the population of NWFP to such an extent that a pro-Taliban religious coalition, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) came into power in the province. This has brought about greater orthodoxy and repression of the rights of women and religious and ethnic minorities in NWFP. The US bombings of Afghanistan in October 2001 meant a further influx of refugees, who continue to reside in the province. Several thousand people were affected and displaced as a consequence of the earthquake that struck northern areas of Pakistan, and Kashmir in October 2005.

Current issues

One of the most controversial actions undertaken by the MMA-led government in NWFP was the adoption of the Hisba bill in 2005. The bill was intended to establish a strict religious regime within the social and legal framework. It established the position of a *Mohtisib* (Ombudsman), whose role included not only inquiring into public maladministration, but also individual personal and moral behaviour, and ensuring that 'Islamic values' were respected and protected. The provisions were highly ambiguous and were perceived by minority groups as an attempt by the religious orthodoxy to repress all forms of human rights and civil liberties under the guise of 'Islamization'. The Hisba law was intended to be immune from any form of judicial review that challenged the actions of the Mohtisib. Reference was made to the Supreme Court, challenging the validity and constitutionality of the Hisba bill in 2005. In light of the vagueness of the provisions of the proposed legislation and the draconian powers conferred to the Mohtisib, the Supreme Court held that the bill was unconstitutional and also against the provisions of Islam. This was a positive judicial activism. However, the court's order to the NWFP governor not to approve the bill has led to further political agitation and unrest by the MMA and those who support religious orthodoxy. Notwithstanding the suspension of the Hisba bill, the backlash against the war on terror is evident: Pakhtun society is witnessing an alarming amount of religious and sectarian violence. During the violence and riots against the publication of the cartoons of Prophet Mohammad, several hundred people were wounded in NWFP, with at least five fatalities in Peshawar during January 2006.