

2003-01-31

Review of: David B. Edwards. Before Taliban: Genealogies of the Afghan Jihad. University of California Press

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/3868>

"Downloaded from OpenBU. Boston University's institutional repository."

2003 Times Higher Education Supplement Jan. 31: 26-7.

Reviewed by Charles Lindholm

Before Taliban: Genealogies of the Afghan Jihad

by David B. Edwards

University of California Press 354pp, £35 and £12.95

ISBN 0-520-22859-6 and 61-8

Published April 2002

The Pathan Unarmed: Opposition and Memory in the North West Frontier

by Mukulika Banerjee

James Currey Publishers 238pp, £40 and £16.95

ISBN 0-85255-272-6 and 273-4

Published 21 December 2000

The Pathans (who call themselves Pashtuns or Pukhtuns, depending on their dialect) inhabiting Northwest Pakistan and Southern Afghanistan first acquired their ambivalent place in the English imagination in 1808, when Mountstuart Elphinstone was sent to Kabul to forge an alliance with them against Napoleon's supposed plans to invade India. Afterwards, they became pawns in English and Russian efforts to command Central Asia.

But the Pathans were never content to be controlled. Their resistance succeeded most famously in 1841, when the British force occupying Kabul was expelled and then annihilated, ending the golden era of the Raj. Afterwards, British and then

Pakistani soldier-administrators struggled, mostly unsuccessfully, to pacify the Pathan tribes of Pakistan's unruly Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP). Most recently, Afghanistan has been the birthplace of the largely Pathan Taliban. Due to this background, the Pathans have been stereotyped as fierce tribal warriors and incorrigible religious zealots. This simple portrait is made far more complicated by the two books under review here, which both use biographies as their central focus. Each will be read by area specialists, but ought to interest a more general readership.

The first, David B. Edwards' Before Taliban, begins with the career of Nur Muhammad Tariki, the head of the 1978 communist revolution that overthrew the unpopular King Daud. Tariki was then assassinated by his second in command in 1979. As Edwards shows, his vision of a state-directed uprising of the proletariat had no resonance with the experiences and understandings of the populace. Repudiating traditional values of family, honor and religion and imposing his collectivist agenda onto the lives of his subjects, he alienated them entirely. A lethal blend of ineptitude, self-righteousness, and cultural ignorance led inevitably to his downfall and to rejection of the Communist revolution he led.

Yet his tribal opponents were no more successful, as the career of Samiullah "Wakil" Safi demonstrates. The educated son of a tribal chief, he had served as a government bureaucrat, but was alienated from the Communist regime and returned to his home valley of Pech to lead a rebellion. The revolt was temporarily

successful, but it was unable to overcome internal dissension and betrayals, as each tribal segment sought its own advantage and refused to accept the authority of any other. Governance by tribal counsel, which required debate and consensus of all the co-equal parties, proved impossibly unwieldy. Nor could any tribal rebellion expand outside of its own region since all other groups were potential opponents, and not to be trusted.

Traditionally, one way that hostile tribes have been united is through the leadership of a Muslim holy man. This was the fond hope of the third figure in Edwards' narrative. The son of a religious scholar, Qazi Muhammad Amin became a leader in the radical Hizb-i-Islami party. Edwards describes Amin's education at Kabul University, where young men from all over Afghanistan met and formed Muslim youth groups in opposition to secularists. A fractionated set of leader-centered religious parties eventually evolved out of this conspiratorial and confrontational atmosphere, struggling among themselves for support from outside donors, such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. The few men who might have brought unity, such as the ecumenical Sufi Maulana Faizani, were murdered in the feeding frenzy. The end result was a popular discrediting of the religious parties and their tribal allies as corrupt degenerates, capable only of squabbling over spoils.

{This delegitimization left the way open for the Taliban, made up of naive and fanatical young Pathan exiles who eschewed previous tribal loyalties, followed anonymous religious leaders, and offered a promise of peace after decades of violence. Of

course, it was not long before they too wore out their welcome by inflicting their strict and idiosyncratic version of Islam on a recalcitrant public - but that is another story.} OPTIONAL CUT

The moral of Edwards' tale is that things go badly when a version of order is forced upon Pathans (and others) who prefer a high degree of personal freedom. Edwards argues persuasively that "political indeterminacy" is perhaps the best possible guarantee of relative peace in such a decentralized and internally contentious social universe.

Mukulika Banerjee has a contrasting, but equally compelling, story to tell: the rise and fall of the Khudai Khidmatgar ("servants of God") movement that swept the region around Peshawar during the battle for independence from England. Known in the West as the "red shirts" for the color of their uniforms, the Khudai Khidmatgars came from the same Pathan culture as their cousins in Afghanistan. Yet the Khudai Khidmatgar practiced strict non-violence in their struggle for independence. Banerjee asks how this could have occurred, given the Pathans' masculine values of honor, revenge, and self-assertion.

She attributes this extraordinary transformation to the charismatic leadership of Abdul Gaffar "Badshah" Khan, a prosperous landlord from a well-known Pathan lineage. Born in 1890 and educated by Christian missionaries, Badshah Khan became involved in the struggle for independence early in his career. The experience of British repression, widespread poverty, and the collapse of the old social order made the Pathans ready for

change. But where earlier revolts had been chaotic, violent and millenarian, Badshah Khan argued that only discipline, non-violence, and practical action could expel the British colonialists. Reinterpreting traditional Pathan values, he convinced his followers that true manliness implied service to others and self-control; instead of fighting the British, his disciples stoically accepted torture; instead of struggling against one another, they competed to serve the community.

Banerjee does a fine job of outlining the context, history, and inner workings of the movement; most importantly, she demonstrates how Badshah Khan combined what the failed leaders in Edwards' work could not. He was simultaneously a tribal chief, a religious figure, and a nationalist leader.

Withstanding much more violent oppression than the Gandians in India, and much better organized, the red shirts demonstrate the potential of the Pathans to redefine their culture, and to achieve something other than indeterminacy and antagonism. Unhappily, their history has been almost wholly erased by Pakistani nationalists. At present, only a few aged and neglected veterans recall this extraordinary struggle. It is to Banerjee's great credit that she has salvaged the moving testimonies of these pacifist warriors. Her work, along with Edwards', tells a complex and often contradictory story that belies any easy generalizations about the Pathans.

1050 words

Charles Lindholm

University Professor and Professor of Anthropology

Boston University