

**PASHTOONWALI — the Pashtoon Code of Life.**

**(Dr. Sayed Wiqar Ali Shah)\***

'Pashtoonwali' is the unwritten constitution of the Pashtoon people living on both sides of the Durand Line, the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. This constitution is traditional and conventional, but its values and sanctions are little affected by variance of space and passage of time. Rigid as it is, it admits no amendments; rather it cannot be amended because there is no institutions to temper with it. To amend it is to break it which, like the violation of the laws of nature leads to sure trouble. Hence like objects of nature with rigid orbits, the Pashtoons, individually as well as collectively, are obliged to abide by the code of Pashtoonwali. However, it does not mean that it is not violated: at times it is flouted by its 'foul' followers.

Etymologically the names of the Pashtoon's (i) language, (ii) person, (iii) land, and, (iv) code are cognate, i.e respectively (i) Pashto (language), (ii) Pashtoon (person), (iii) Pashtoonkhwa (land), and (iv) Pashtoonwali (code). This word 'wali' is suffix, added to a noun, denoting an attitude and behaviour towards the words it is added to. *Tarbur* means cousin, *Tarburwali* means one's attitude and behaviour towards one's cousin. Hence Pashtoonwali means one Pashtoon's behaviour towards another Pashtoon. The very word Pashto which is the name of the language, also means the spirit of Pashtoonwali, the code. 'Pathan' is a Hindi word, and for that matter Anglicised as well, which is used for the peoples inhabiting both the sides of Durand Line.

Articles of the Pashtoonwali are names of some isolated, though closely connected, concepts and conventions which taken together form the code of Pashtoonwali. These are, in fact, parts of a whole. Many a non-Pashtoon writers have ably attempted to appreciate the Pashtoon code but where as they have taken conventions of the code, they have

\* The present paper is mainly based on the author's personal experiences and observation of the Pashtoon society. However, for the convenience of the reader some important sources are given in the end.

missed the concepts behind these conventions which, like causes and motivations in a social phenomenon, are more important than consequences and effects. Moreover, they brought under their study only those objects which they could visibly observe, and not those subtle concepts and imperceptible motivations which they could not perceive. The concept is to the convention in the Pashtoon's code, what a cause is so the effect.

We would take first only those conventions and features of the Pashtoonwali which strike non-Pashtoon visitors at first sight.

I: **Melmastya**: (Hospitality)

The major characteristic of a Pashtoon is his hospitality. In serving a guest he feels pride and pleasure. His doors are open not only to an acquaintance and friend but also to a stranger. For the latter he becomes more particular in providing every kind of comfort. With him hospitality is a moral obligation, and the one who avoids its practice is considered lacking the spirit of Pashtoonism. Hospitality, however, does not mean that the host should overdo and cross limits of his financial resources. A Pashtoon guest always tries to check the extravagance of his host's hospitality. He would not relish a comfort provided to him is at the cost of his host's inconvenience. This leads to a 'tug of war' between the guest and the host, each thinking in terms of other's comforts and facility. It follows that if the conventions of the Pashtoon hospitality binds the host to be un-necessarily extravagant in serving his guest, it also enjoins upon the latter to prevent the former from doing so. However, on the first day of hospitality a host knows no bounds and spend lavishly on his guest. If a sheep is not readily available, at least a chicken is roasted as the barest minimum.

Pashtoon dishes have a large variety, but the rice dish called 'pullao' is served everywhere. This is not the only item on table, the 'dastarkhwan', or the eating-mat. Several vegetables with mutton and beef are also prepared. But what transcends all the meal-material and which is counted more than the menu is the spirit of sincerity that shines on the face of the host. If a guest senses lack of it in his host then nothing can satisfy his sense of respect as he takes it as if he is an unwelcome guest. So a guest's eyes look more for the warmth of his host's heart than what lies on the eating-mat. It is always in this way that a guest gauges his respect from the natural barometer of his host's face.

A very good feature of the Pashtoon hospitality is that a guest is seldom considered a guest of one single person alone. If he visits a village only to visit a friend he is considered the guest of the whole village. Everybody tries, according to their means, to offer something to the guest. They fetch their meals to the 'Hujra' or a village meeting-place, and share every morsel with 'their' guest. This practice of the Pashtoons lessens the burden of one person when he is faced to feed many guests who visit him especially on the eve of some demise. This also creates in them a sense of belonging to one family.

## II: **BADAL**: (Revenge)

The taking of revenge for some wrong is one of the fundamentals of the Pashtoon code. Revenge is always a reaction or retaliation against a wrong or an insult caused to a Pashtoon. Anything done as an insult to him sets him on fire which he extinguishes by taking its revenge. In the Pashtoonland three things are inviolable: 'Zan' (women), 'Zar' (wealth) and 'Zamin' (land or property). A least molestation with these three 'Zs' more especially the first, drives him mad as he loses his status and respect in eyes of his people. An outrage against any of the three 'Zs', especially the first is the chief cause of murders and other crimes among the Pashtoons. They live and die for them.

According to the Pashtoon spirit it is a social obligation not to let an offender go unpunished, that is to avenge a wrong done to a Pashtoon. But at the same time, he is not supposed to outdo the wrong. An 'eye for an eye' and an 'ear for an ear' is the rule of revenge. In reaction and retaliation if he commits something disproportionate to the original wrong then he loses the sympathies of his people.

The practice of *Badal* in the Pashtoon society is a vicious circle which ends only after the destruction of several persons of the two rival families. Some time the feud goes on from one generation to another, father bequeathing the obligation of revenge to his sons and grandsons. In such situations it is never a single individual's combat. Usually the feud is fought by 'proxy' a son fights and kills for the reason that his father or brother has been insulted or killed or fought with. The feud once started is kept alive and carried on from man-to-man level to inter-family level or even inter-tribal level.

### III: NANAWATEY: (Begging Pardon)

*Nanawatey* literally means 'entering into' or 'going into' and anyone who gain access to a Pashtoon's house can claim asylum. He is protected by the owner of the house even at the cost of his life. Some writers has defined *nanawatey* as grant of asylum to fugitives or extreme hospitality. But the grant of asylum or sanctuary is only one aspect of *nanawatey* while its exact definition and true spirit seems to have been ignored. As a matter of fact, it is a means to end long outstanding disputes and blood feuds and transforms enmity into friendship. Under *nanawatey* a penitent enemy is forgiven and the feuding factions resume peaceful and friendly relations. When a person realises his being on the wrong in killing or injuring another person, he goes to the house or the *Hujra* of the aggrieved party and throws himself at his feet, thus confessing his fault and begs pardon of the person or family whose sense of honour he had injured. To show his meanness and meekness the offender slaughter sheep or goats at the door of his enemy. *Nanawatey*, which literally means 'going into one's door',<sup>1</sup> is a means to an end, i.e, to end an enmity. The act of *Nanawatey* is so mean in its meaning that it leaves no option with an offended person or family but to pardon the offender. Thus an aggrieved person hugs the very killer of his kith or kin.

To make easy his begging for pardon, an offender usually takes a party of the village elders, called *Masharan*, who too beg forgiveness for him from his enemy. The pardon or mercy thus sought at the doors of a Pashtoon is seldom refused. It is always granted without any condition or consideration. Soon after the grant of pardon the elders sit to settle certain terms between the two parties. The aggrieved party is requested to end its hostilities with the aggressor party publicly. The aggressor is asked either to pay an indemnity or part with a piece of land in favour of the aggrieved party. The aggressor having left with no

---

<sup>1</sup>: 'A gang of bandits attacked a village, whose inhabitants, men and women, rushed out to defend their homes — all but an old women too decrepit to do anything. She stood in the door of her house, while her two sons engaged in the fight. The bandits were routed, but two of them, finding themselves unable to escape, forced their way into the old lady's house and begged for asylum. When her neighbours came after them and told her that the bandits had killed her sons, she replied proudly, 'That is so, but these men came *nanawati* under my roof, and no one shall lay a hand on them while I live'. Christine Weston, *Afghanistan* (New York, 1962), p. 58. Another story of *nanawatey* has been given as under.

Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna went hunting and wounded a deer with an arrow. The poor animal fled and took shelter in the tent of a humble shepherd, and when the Sultan and his entourage arrived on their horses, they found the shepherd standing at the entrance of the tent, barring their way. The Sultan commanded the man to produce the wounded deer, but he flatly refused, declaring that since the wounded beast had sought refuge under his roof he was in honour bound to protect it at any cost. The Sultan blustered and threatened,

options bows his head in humility and declares his obedience to the elder's verdict. It often happens that the aggrieved party, the one promised to be paid in cash or kind, refuses to accept anything from the aggressor, thus signifying the unconditional character of its grant of pardon. It is for God's sake. If a person accepts any material consideration in lieu of the pardon, it is looked upon by people as ungracious on his part. He is considered to have sold his deceased relative for a few coins.

Some times pardon is begged not directly by the offender for fear of being refused as the wound is either too fresh or too grievous. He seeks this pardon through a group of the village elders called *Misharan* who form a party called the 'Jirga'. This Jirga intercedes with the aggrieved party for the aggressor. It is not incumbent upon the aggrieved party to accede to or agree with the requests and proposals of the elders. Here the aggrieved party is at liberty either to accept or reject the overture, the Jirga's intercession. The Jirga cannot force or coerce the aggrieved into acceptance, albeit the aggressor is sometime forced to agree into the Jirga's terms and conditions for settling the scare. If he does not listen to the Jirga then he is left alone, all by himself. He thus virtually loses Jirga's and for that reason of the whole village's assurances of safety and security. To settle the dispute the Jirga proceeds quite in a democratic arbitration through mutual consultations. It always bears two things in mind: first, the degree of the wrong done to the aggrieved party, and secondly, the facts about the wrong. The 'elders' of the Jirga always know for certain the ins and outs of the matter, and it is from this knowledgeable position that they unanimously pronounce a decision which is binding on both sides. The violation of the Jirga's verdict and decision is punishable.

The aggrieved party may demand a piece of land, but seldom cash, especially in case of murder, in lieu of the wrong done. To the demand of land the aggressor may agree but it is very difficult and in most cases impossible for an aggressor to submit to a demand in which he is asked to give his daughter or sister to the aggrieved family for ending hostilities. This is the worst type of indemnity demanded by the aggrieved party or by the Jirga itself, from the aggressor. Not that girls (daughters and sisters, and not other female relatives) are not given. The aggressor do give girls to the aggrieved for settling the dispute, but only in disputes of really very grievous and heinous nature in which the thirst for revenge and indication of honour cannot be achieved in any other way. The girl thus given is called *Swara*. In most cases the poor girls becomes a scape-goat. Although a member of the aggrieved family gets her married in a proper, befitting manner with all ceremonies, yet is in bitter at the hands of her in-laws as the memory of the wrong done to the family haunts it and the family female members treat her very ungenerously. She is left with no way out, but to remain confined in her husband's hell-house, she can never visit her father's house which she would have done in otherwise normal circumstances.

The status of women in Pashtoon society is very unenviable. It is an irony of fate that a woman receives different treatments at the hands of a Pashtoon husband. Her honour, not necessarily her body, is jealously guarded by him! A mere look of a slightly slanting nature at his women folk by another person is a sufficient cause to kill him. Hence disgrace, not to talk of molestation of women is very rare in the Pashtoon

---

his escort drew their swords, but the shepherd stood his ground, and in the end the royal party was shamed

society. The back-drop scenes of love affairs, however, between Pashtoon males and females, do exist which seldom escape scandalisation which is called *Thora*, meaning 'blackened'. Thus a girl, when scandalised, becomes *Thora*. This 'blacking of a lady' is a metaphoric expression meaning that the white apron of her chastity and honour is tainted black. The shame of *Thore* (black) for a father or brother is just unbearable. Socially the entire family goes to dogs and becomes unable to make public show. The family retrieves her honour and restore her lost social status in public eyes only by putting both the boy and girl to death. In most cases the girl precedes the boy in being murdered either by her father or brother.

#### IV: **PAIGHORE:** (Taunt)

'*Paighore* has ruined several houses', runs a Pashto saying. In the Pashtoon society some commissions or omissions of conduct lead to *Paighore*, with which a person is taunted. An unavenged murder of a father becomes a *Paighore* for a son; an elopement of a sister is an action for which her brother and first cousin is taunted. A son of a murdered father waits for an opportune time to take the revenge of his father. But he is most liable to be taunted by another person in the characteristic tone: 'Don't boast of your bravery; go and take the revenge of your father's murder'. This *Paighore* boils his blood and without losing any moment or thinking over the dire consequences involved, straight away goes and kills his father's murderer, or the paramour of his sister whom she eloped with. Hence *Paighore* is so bad a thing that every Pashtoon prays to God to save him from this curse and its cause.

#### V: **HUJRA:** (a Meeting Place)

In every Pashtoon village there is a meeting place where people assemble and talk to each other. This is the present day drawing-room in extension but with great difference in space and scope. *Hujra* is a Persian word, and its Hindi equivalent is 'Bhetak'; meaning a drawing-room. But the size, structure and significance of the Pashtoon *Hujra* can be appreciated from the fact that it is open to all the people of a village. A big village has got several *Hujras* each within separate wards called *Malat*, *Cham* or *Kanday*. One cannot imagine a Pashtoon village without a mosque, and so without a *Hujra*. Whereas a mosque is specific for prayers and other religious practices in a *Hujra* secular and mundane social affairs are talked and discussed.

The institution of the *Hujra* is as old as the Pashtoon. It is said that the *Hujra* originated out of necessity and not by choice. It was in the time of Alexander the Great, when he reached Pashtoonkhwa, that all the Pashtoos assembled in an open meeting-place and put their heads together devising means to ward off the world conqueror. This assembly and discussion was liked and appreciated by the white-bearded Pashtoon elders. They created many an assembly place in several villages where they discussed the problems they faced. This is how the Pashtoon's *Hujras* originated.

The scope and significance of the Pashtoon *Hujra* lie in the fact that it serves several other purposes of the Pashtoon society. It is their place of get-together. It is here that they come to know about each other's

problems. When in the morning they go out of their homes, the first place they visit is the *Hujra* where they get themselves informed of the events that may have taken place during the previous day. Here they learn about the occurrences from births and deaths to rivalries and reconciliation's in their village. Hence the *Hujra* is a Pashtoon's information centre giving him the news of the socio-political developments that take place in the area.

To the Pashtoon young people the *Hujra* becomes a place where they are taught ethics and morality. There they learn how to talk before elders and treat their equals. They watch other people's behaviour and learn how to stand with dignity and respect in the society. In the *Hujra* the actions and behaviour of other people are brought under discussion, say by way of gossip; certain things are liked and appreciated by the elders, and the young boys are urged to follow these while others are condemned and they are cautioned to abstain from them. They are advised not to do such things that bring a bad name to their fathers and grand-fathers whose lives themselves were beacon lights for others. 'You are a son of a noble father', thus says an elder to a youth 'it is not becoming of your family'. As a corollary the Pashtoon youth who attend the *Hujra* learns much about life and its hardships. There they sit in the company of the village elders who are usually good talkers. The youth listen to the 'unpublished, original' personal accounts of their lives, full of strange scenes and interesting adventures. These thrilling stories take their breath away and make the narrator look like a hero of a real drama. These chivalrous stories enrich their knowledge of life and understanding of human behaviour.

Another aspect of the *Hujra* is that it is the nucleus of the Pashtoon society. It is here that they get together and hold meetings and discuss matters of co-interest freely and frankly. It is their 'Parliament' in miniature, minus the already present treasury and opposition benches, though clash of interest divide them. Any matter that concerns them is brought before them and that matter can lead the discussion to a virtual brawl but it happens only when the immature minds are left to discuss serious matters. But when during a discussion they become rash or lose tempers, there steps in a white-bearded old man who seems to embody the wisdom of the world and applies a brake to the heat and furry: 'Peace, brothers, peace'. Like a Speaker of a parliament he moderates and guides the discussion to a happy conclusion. Sometimes he uses his special prerogative to expel a member from the *Hujra*-discussion as he does not know how to talk discreetly.

In the *Hujra* the Pashtoons hold their marriage ceremonies and conduct condolence meetings. In case of a marriage ceremony or any other happy event, they hold music and dance concerts. However, these gaieties are not attended by the elders. It is also used for condolence meetings where people come from other villages to express their sympathies with a bereaved family. The Pashtoon's *Hujra*, in short, is a place where they give vent to their joy and sorrow. It is there 'commune' where they share each other's grief and joy. Nothing is individual; one man's concern is everybody's concern. Here they meet to lessen the burden of their woes and increases joy of their weal. Their *Hujra* thus, besides their blood bonds, binds them together a communal fraternity.

While discussing Pashtoonwali, a mention must also be made of *Chigha* (pursuit party), *Badragga* (armed escort), *Bulandra* or *Ashar* (village aid programme or mutual co-operation and assistance), and, *Meerata* (complete annihilation of the male members of a family by brutal assassination).

For **References, Notes** and more details see:

- 1: Abdul Ghani Khan, *The Pathans — A Sketch* (Peshawar, nd).
- 2: Qiyamuddin Khadim, *Pashtoonwali* (Pashto), (Kabul, nd).
- 3: Fahima Rahimi, *Women in Afghanistan* (Liestal, 1986).
- 4: Mary Louis Clifford, *The Land and People of Afghanistan* (New York, 1973).
- 5: Frederick Barth, *Political Leadership Among Swat Pathans* (London, 1959).
- 6: David Ditcher, *The North-West Frontier of Pakistan* (Oxford, 1967).
- 7: Mounstuart Elphinstone, *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul I* (London, 1842).
- 8: T. L. Pennel, *Among the Wild Tribes of the Afghan Frontier* (London, 1909).
- 9: Robert Warburton, *Eighteen Years in Khyber* (London, 1900).
- 10: Mohammad Ali, *The Afghans* (Kabul, 1965).
- 11: Christine Weston, *Afghanistan* (New York, 1962).
- 12: R. T. I. Ridgway, *Pathans* (Calcutta, 1910).
- 13: George B. Scott, *Afghans and Pathan A Sketch* (London, 1929).
- 14: Mohammad Azim Khan, 'Pathan Way of Life' (Peshawar, unpublished).
- 15: Samundar Khan, *Pukhtaney* (Peshawar, 1975).