

Origin of the Afghans: Myths and Reality¹

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Abstract

Although the study of the origin of the Afghans has gained much attention previously among the local and some European scholars, the same cannot be said precisely in the present times. It became a neglected topic and no proper research has been done on this important topic for some obvious reasons. Since the last few decades the region has gone through tremendous extraordinary changes and these and similar other academic issues have been given secondary importance. The whole region became a conflict zone where many warring parties were seen in pursuing 'their' personal agendas. Chaos and anarchy prevailed in the area and this resulted in the upsurge of militancy and scholastic discussions seem irrelevant.

The main purpose of the present paper is to clear the misconception/myths regarding the origin of the Afghans and to apprise the people of the importance of the subject. It will help understand the contentious issue and will also help in explaining the matter which remained unresolved for many years. Utmost care has been taken by utilizing both primary and authentic secondary sources to recuperate the analysis by converging arguments both in favour and against the various theories presented.

"No ethnological problem is more complicated and intricate" writes C. C. Davies, "than that which is presented by the North-West Frontier of India. Hidden away in dark, inhospitable nullahs and still darker ravines, in lonely mountain passes and on barren, windswept plains, dwells a people, the human flotsam and jetsam of the past" (Davies 1974:37). More than ten million people inhabiting Afghanistan,

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Pakistan and India are known variously as Afghans², Pathans and Pashtuns. Who and what these people are have not yet been made completely clear. Numerous theories have been put forward to explain the origin of the Afghans. They have been traced as Jews, Armenians, descendants of Hazrat Ibrahim, Bani Solymi and the Aryans.

Several Pashtun historians are of the opinion that the Pashtuns originated from Israelites. The first one who pleaded for the theory was Khwaja Ni'mat Ullah. According to him it so happened that once in the reign of Jahangir-the Mughul King, the question of the origin of the Afghans was discussed. The Persian ambassador spoke ill of the Afghans as descended from *devs* and amused the king by giving him the following account.

"Books of authority", he said, "recounted that once King Zuhak, hearing of a race of beautiful women that lived in some far-off western countries, sent an army thither, which was defeated by the beautiful women, but afterwards, a stronger expedition being sent under Nariman, they were reduced to sue for peace and gave in tribute a thousand virgins. When, on its return march, the army was one night encamped close to a wild mountainous country, there suddenly came down upon it a phantom, smote and scattered the troops in all directions, and then, in that one night, ravished all the thousand virgins. In due time all became pregnant, and when Zuhak learnt this, he gave orders that the women should be kept in the remote deserts and plains lest the unnatural off-spring should breed strife and tumult in the cities. The off-spring was the race of the Afghans" (Hayat 1981: 53).

After hearing the disgraceful story of the origin of the Afghans, Khan Jahan Lodhi, himself an Afghan *amir* asked his secretary Ni'mat Ullah to collect the account of the history of Afghans. Ni'mat Ullah sent five³ of his servants to Afghan country for the purpose of making inquiries of the origin of the races and from the information they gained, they pleaded for the Bani Isrealies origin of the Afghans. After their expulsion from their native land (Jerusalem) by Nebuchadnasser

² The derivation of 'Afghans incidentally is unknown, though it was first used in a work called "Hudud al Alam" by an anonymous Arab geographer, written about AD 982.

³ They were Qutb Khan, Sarmast Khan Abadali, Hamza Khan, Umar Khan Kakarr and Zarfi Khan.

(Bakhtnassar) they took refuge in the 'Kohistan-i-Ghor' and 'Koh-i-Ferozah'. With increase in their number they started subduing the neighbouring countries and became the masters of the country. With the passage of time their frontiers extended up to Kohistan-i-Kabul, Kandahar and Ghazni (Bellew 1978: 52).

Khalid bin Walid, one of the most prominent generals belonged to the same tribe of Bani Isreal as did the Afghans. After his acceptance of Islam, he invited his brethren and informed them of the appearance of last of the Prophets-Mohammad (PBUH) (Ni'mat Ullah 1976: 37). They started for Arabia under the leadership of Qais and on reaching there, after prolonged deliberations, accepted Islam (Arif 1963:XXIV-XXV).⁴ Kais married Sa'ra, the daughter of Khalid, by his wife, he became father of three sons, Saraban, Ghorghust and Baitan (Bellew n.d:19). Many of the historians presented numerous arguments in favour of the theory. Hafiz Rahmat Khan, in his *Khulasat-ul-Ansab*, has given a complete list of genealogical table of the Afghans descended from Talut (Rahmat 1973: 49-97),-a prominent figure in the annals of Bani Israel.

According to Sir William Jones, the Afghans are the lost ten tribes of Bani Israel mentioned by the Prophet Isdras as having escaped from captivity and taken refuge in Asarah; identical with the modern Hazarajat in Afghanistan (Caroe 1964: 5).

Alexander Burnes was of the opinion that the Afghans had strong prejudices against the Jews, it was impossible, without a just cause if they desired to claim a descent from the Hebrews (Caroe 1964: 6). H.G. Raverty, referring to Cyrus, the Persian king, has made it clear

⁴ Mohammad Arif Khan, *The Story of Swat as told by its Own Founder Miangul Wadood Badshah Sahib*, Peshawar, 1963, pp. XXIV-XXV.

According to the traditions, Khalid bin Walid invited his brethren to accept the great faith. The elders of the Afghans, more than forty in number under the leadership of one Qais started for Arabia. On reaching there, they were presented before the Holy Prophet (PBUH) who invited them to accept Islam. After discussing the matter together, they accepted it. The Prophet (PBUH) became very pleased and conferred on Qais the title of Abdur Rashid. When the delegation left the city, Holy Prophet addressed them with these words: "Haza Batany Deen" Ibid. Batan meant the rudder of the ship. Khushal Khan added that, the title of Batan was conferred on Afghans by Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi after performing courageous deeds in the battle of Somanath. See Dost Mohammad Kamil, *On a Foreign Approach to Khushal*, Peshawar, 1968, p. 119.

that it was customary for the great king to transport a whole tribe or nation from one place to another. The Jews had proved themselves to be a troublesome nation, so there were possibilities if he had ousted them from his Empire and they settled in the Satrapies of the Persian Empire (Caroe 1964:6). It is also stated in *Tabakat-i-Nasiri*, that in the time of Shansabi dynasty, there were people known as Bani Israel living in that country, engaged in trade with the neighbouring countries (Bellew n.d: 15).

The Afghans have an unwritten law known as *Pashtunwali* which is very similar in character and principle with the law given by Moses to his people (ibid. 1979: 213). There is a resemblance in their names with the Hebrews like Yusufzai, Daudzai, Sulemanzai and Musakhel (Khan 1982: 407). Qazi Ata Ullah had narrated that at the arrival of Nadir Shah, the king of Persia, to Peshawar, he was presented with a manuscript of the Bible by the Yusufzais. The Bible was written in Hebrew language. The Jews that formed a part of Nadir's army acknowledged it as a part of Judaism and Hebrew language (Ata n.d:2). According to Maulana Abdul Qadir, there are several clans (Mongol and Tartars) which resemble in features the Israelites (Qadir 1964: 96).

There are several arguments which may be put against the theory. Has a Jew, ever forsaken his Jewish faith? The theory would make us believe that the sons of Afghana who went to Makkah remained true to their faith, but not the ones who went to Ghor. Nobody has ever told us about the religion of those Afghans living in Ghor, whether they were practicing Judaism or any other religion till the time of their conversion to Islam (Caroe 1964: 6). Apart from some Afghan historians, all other Muslim traditions, state that Khalid bin Walid belonged to Bani Makhzum of the Quraish (Caroe 1964: 7). The resemblance of names between the Jews and the Afghans was probably the result of Arab influences in the Subcontinent (Elphinstone 1972: 208). Holy prophet himself adopted many customs from the Jews living around him. To quote Percy Sykes, "Actually this theory is of purely literary origin and is merely an example of the wide spread custom among Muslims of claiming descent from some personage mentioned in the Koran or other sacred work" (Sykes 1979: 13). It seems incredible that the whole race, has, in course of time completely changed their language without trace. "They can adduce, however, no

authentic evidence", says H. W. Bellew, "in support of their claim to so honourable a lineage. All their records on this subject-and they are mostly traditionary, and handed down orally from generation to generation-are extremely vague and incongruous, and abound in fabulous and distorted accounts..." (Bellew 1978: 46-47).

Some people believed that the Afghans belonged to Caucasia. Mounstuart Elphinstone was informed by an Armenian that the Afghans belonged to their race. Elphinstone compared a vocabulary of Pashto with Georgian and other languages of Caucasian tribes but found no resemblance between them (Elphinstone 1972: 206).

Some are of the opinion that the Afghans descended from Bibi Qatoora, the wife of Hazrat Ibrahim. According to them, after the death of Bibi Sara, Ibrahim married Bibi Qatoora, from Bibi Qatoora he had six sons.⁵ Ibrahim distributed his belongings among his sons and said goodbye to them. He sent all of them towards the east. They settled in Turan-a place in the North-West of Iran; where they were joined by their brethren, expelled by King Talut. All of them established themselves in Pasht. The same Pasht, according to them was Parthia which was known as Tabaristan in Islamic times. Slowly and gradually they were termed as Pashtin and lately as Pashtun and Pashtaneh (Zafar n.d: 62-65).

By the Muslims of the Asia Minor and the western countries the Afghans are usually called Sulemannis, apparently from the supposition that they dwelt on the Suleman Range of mountains (Bellew n.d: 24). If so, the name is misapplied for there are no Afghans settled on that range. To some they originated from the Albanians of Asia, who were exiled from Persia as far as Khorassan (Yunus n.d:10).

By a large group of historians the Afghans are believed to be the Aryans. About 1500 BC they laid the foundation of a new culture-fairly advanced (Hussain 1961:33). Historians differed on their early homeland. Some considered them Northern European people, while some are of the opinion that the Northern bank of Black Sea was their original home-land. Some traced their origin to the southern territories of Russia while others considered Mongolia and Chinese Turkestan as their birth place. However, most of the modern researchers agree on

⁵ According to Bible their names were; Zumran, Yuqsan, Medan, Madyan, Asbaq and Sookh, Zafar, P. 62.

their birthplace in between the Pamirs and Oxus which is known as Bakhtar (Zafar n.d:68).

They breded slowly and gradually in the fields of Bakhtar. When their number increased, they started moving out of the green fields of Bakhtar. One of their main groups which is known as Indo-Aryans, crossed Hindu Kush⁶ settled in the valleys of Laghman and slowly and gradually reached up to the valleys of Swat and the Indus river. They crossed the Indus and settled in the Punjab. Some of them crossed the Khyber Pass and joined hands with their kinsmen in Punjab. They spread further and reached the valleys of Ganges and Jumna. The inhabitants of the areas-the Dravidians-were subjugated by the Aryans and most of them left their lands and migrated to other parts of India. Second part of the same Aryans, crossed Herat areas and formed the present day Iran. When two of the large parts of the Aryans had migrated from Bakhtar, the lands were now in plenty for the remaining ones, who were known as the Central Aryans or Aryans of Bakhtar (Ibid: 69-70).

According to the historians the same Central or Bactrian Aryans were the ancestors of the Pashtuns. They had settled in the areas of Balkh, Herat, Kabul and Gandhara. They gave it the name of Aryana. In the hymns of Reg Veda,⁷ there was a clear cut indication of Sindho (Indus), Kubha (Kabul), Kuruma (Kurram), Gumati (Gomal), Savastu (Swat) and other rivers of the area. Above all, according to Bahadur Shah Zafar, the philologists agree that Pashto joined hands with the Aryans group of languages (Ibid: 73-101). Abdul Haye Habibi, the most eminent scholar, has given a list of Pashto words which resemble

⁶ The name, by traditions, means 'Hindu Killer', and derives from the fact that in previous centuries thousands of slaves brought from India died in its snow blocked passes. The Hindu Kush was known to the Greeks who called it 'Paropamisus'. It is a great range, 600 miles long, with its main ridges reaching 15,000 and even 20,000 feet and the subsidiary ridges running off both to north and south. The main passes of Hindu Kush are the Khawak Pass 11,640 feet, the AK Robat at 12,560 feet and the Qipchak at 13,900 feet. It was also called the 'Indian Caucasus'.

⁷ Reg Veda, The Book of knowledge, consists of more than a thousand wonderful hymns of different ages arranged into ten books. It is regarded as the earliest document of Indian history. Hymns of Reg Veda composed in between 1500 BC and 1000 BC. According to the scholars of the Vedas, the hymns of Reg Veda were composed in the vicinity of Hindu Kush and the plains of the present day Pakistan.

other languages of the House of Aryans (Habibi 1946: 15). Aryans were white and with a stout physique. They were far from physical diseases. The Afghans are also stout and are mostly of fair complexion.

A new theory about the origin of the Afghans has been presented by various scholars on scientific lines. Fraser Tytler pleaded for the mixed race theory: according to which the Pashtuns are Aryans by origin but have intermingled with elements of Turkish, Mongol and other strains, which have at different times infiltrated into them (Tytler 1958: 49). He was supported by Charles Miller saying that "they had been on the scene for centuries, by a bubbling ethnic stew of Persian, Greek, Scythian, Turk and Mongol to mention only a few of the invading and migrating peoples who contributed their racial ingredients to the Afghan stock" (Miller 1977: 8). Abdul Ghani Khan also shares the same opinion. He considers the Afghans as a mixture of many races that came through their areas from Central Asia (Khan n.d: 5). Saddum and Khyber are two places, which according to Bahadur Shah, resembled in names that of Bani Israel (Zafar n.d: 143-144).⁸ Mir Afzal Khan Jadoon is of the opinion that the features as well as the habits of the Afghans resembled the Jews. Apart from the clans of Karlan and Mati, Tannawalis, Swatis and Jadoons, all resemble in their dwelling as well as clothes the Jews (Ibid: 144).

Many relics of Syriac language were found during the excavations at Taxila, Laghman, Gandhara and Qandahar. As the evidences show all of the Syriac people were ruling Aryana at a time. With the passage of time they had mixed with the indigenous population (Ibid: 145). In the fifth century A.D. Hind was invaded by a wild race known as the 'White Huns' or 'Ephthalites' though they had not firmly established themselves, yet one can easily find their remnants in the Gujars of the hilly areas (Ibid.:148). In the Ummayyad reign, Arabs came to Afghanistan. With the passage of time they had absorbed themselves in Afghanistan (Ibid: 149). In the beginning of 13th century Chingiz Khan invaded Afghanistan. Thereafter, Yellow race mixed with the Afghans. There is very much similarity in the Hazaras of Afghanistan and the Mongols (Ibid: 149-150).

To conclude, this is clear by evidences that Pashtuns are Aryans but with the passage of time many foreign strains mixed with them.

The Pashtuns of hilly areas are considered more pure as compared to their brethren of plains because of inaccessibility of the invaders to those mountains. As mentioned earlier, the aim of the present research is essentially two folds: to develop a critical evaluation of the various theories related to the origin of the Afghans; and , to attract/engage the attention of scholars writing on the area to contribute once again on this important topic, thus, help clear the mist around the origin of the Afghans and to share their opinion on academic issues rather than focusing only on the topics related to militancy and the rising tide of terrorism and only by doing so the main purpose of the present paper will be amply served.

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