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Pakhtuns: The misunderstood nation

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The historic Pakhtun nation has long been stigmatized with fanaticism, extremism, vandalism, barbarism and violence. But there is no veracity in such a negative portrait of the Pakhtuns. They have happened to be a civilized nation of the world as is evident from their centuries-old social, cultural, political and religious history. Gandhara, the land of Pakhtuns, has been a unique example of religious pluralism and cultural diversity. Despite the constant foreign invasions, a continuous historic continuity is most discernable in Pakhtunkhwa through the process of syncretism. And all this renders the Pakhtuns to be one of the most dynamic people of the world. Tolerance, patience, pluralism and secularism are important ingredients of Pakhtunwali, the code of life of the Pakhtuns. Pakhtunwali is the synthesis of all those good norms and values which Greco-Bactrian culture, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism and Islam have introduced into the land of the Pakhtuns. If one is to understand the Pakhtuns, he must have to know in depth about the nature and spirit of Pakhtunwali. But, unfortunately, no one takes pains at finding the reality: the Pakhtuns have erroneously been taken as they have been depicted by the colonial masters in their writings. Ironically, the tradition of historiography has not been remained strong enough in the Pakhtuns. It may, probably, be due to their long association with the religion of Buddha. History has no point of interest for Buddhism. And the Pakhtuns, unfortunately, have not divested themselves of this legacy. As a corollary, the gaps in the Pakhtun history in addition to the absence of their own version of the past and the subsequent distortion and misrepresentation in this regard have reduced the Pakhtuns' national life to a mere mockery. Gandhara has happened to be a "crossroad" and "melting-pot" of cultures. The outsiders came across the Pakhtuns time after time. These outsiders consist of the Achaemenians, the Greeks, the Mauryans, the Bactrian Greeks, the Sakas, the Kushans and lastly the British colonialists. The Britishers have the bitterest experience of this encounter. They came with the concept of the "white man burden". This conception provided a template to the colonial masters against which the Pakhtuns and the universe of Pakhtunwali were

measured. This ideological obsession reduced the native culture to a mere trash. Naturally, Pakhtunkhwa presented a sorrow picture for the colonial constructions. In addition to the cultural relativism, the vested interests of the colonial ethnographers and administrators also influenced their approach to the Pakhtuns. They have been, purposefully, documented in history books negatively, in distorted and truncated shape. The successive generations, even the academicians, cannot entice away from this biased frame of reference about the Pakhtuns. With the exception of the British, all the outsiders found Gandhara a fertile land. They got mixed up with the native people and spearheaded the development of human civilization. The Chinese pilgrims, who came here in pursuit of spiritual loftiness, were eye-witnesses to the facts of peaceful coexistence. They presented a paradise-like view of the Pakhtun land. This shows how differently the Chinese pilgrims, who had no axe to grind, and the colonial masters, who were Eurocentric to excess, approached to the world-view the Pakhtuns held. The British interpretation of the Pakhtun history, unfortunately, gained currency throughout the world. Pakhtunwali is the epitome of religious tolerance. This very characteristic has been the spirit of the Pakhtun society through ages. Being a “crossroad” and “melting-pot” of cultures, Pakhtunkhwa was made home to different religions and philosophies of life. The people got internalized the influences of different religions. In addition to it, the age-long presence of Buddhism in the Pakhtun land also added to religious tolerance. An era of religious pluralism and syncretism, thus, began to prevail culminating in the great period of Gandhara. The Pakhtuns have since then not been at a loss in the context of religious tolerance. They have been clinging to the idea of religious harmony and peaceful coexistence, an asset which is to be termed as their ancestral bequest. Sayed Jamal-ud-Din Afghani, a renowned nineteenth century thinker and the founder of Pan-Islamism, in his book *Tarikh-ul-Afghan*, also concedes to the facts of this account. Pakhtunkhwa has also been au fait to the concept of secularism. Pakhtunwali draws a clear line of demarcation between the spheres of holy and profane. This fact is well reflected in the two important institutions of the Pakhtun society, Hujra (the men’s guest house) and Jumat (mosque). And this very belief is responsible for the centuries-old social harmony in Pakhtunkhwa. Whenever and wherever obscurantist forces, such as the Indian Fanatics led by Sayed Ahmad Barelvi in the nineteenth century, tried to bring the mundane inside the walls of the sacred the Pakhtuns could not get well with it. They rejected obscurantism against time in totality. A desire for peace is intrinsic to human beings. This is the spirit of all religions and for this purpose they preach love. Love and peace, symbiotically, lead to the perfection of man and human civilization. Pakhtunkhwa is fortunate enough in this respect. The moral influences of various religions and philosophies of life have left a mark on the minds of the Pakhtuns to the effect that their society epitomized the grace of God in terms of love and peace for long. Again the great Gandharan period is a perfect example of peace and harmony in the Pakhtun history. Of course, Pakhtunkhwa saw destruction and bore a brunt at the hands of the Huns. It also, subsequently, witnessed other disruptive philosophies and misfortunes. But the peace-loving spirit of the inhabitants of this land could not be eclipsed into a state of permanent violence. In modern times, when Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan alias Bacha Khan, the founder of the Khudai Khidmatgar Movement, galvanized this dead hand of history, a movement took place; a movement for peace, love and tolerance. It was the negation of violence, hatred and vandalism in the historical tradition. Ironically, Pakhtunkhwa is now bereft of these values and ideals. The colonial constructions might have benefited the British Empire in Asia but, in the long run, it proved counter-productive. Due to the Britishers’ obsession with “red bear” and the subsequent Cold War and Afghan Jihad changed the Pakhtun society for

negative. Thus, Pakhtunkhwa was deprived of Pakhtunwali. The resultant reality of all this may be seen in the chaotic phenomenon of the so-called terrorism and war against terrorism. It is, thus, highly imperative to take an unprejudiced and corrective measure to depict the true picture of the Pakhtuns. For this purpose, a fresh study of the Pakhtun culture, politics and religion in the context of the Pakhtun history ought to be initiated. If the Pakhtuns' national life is contextualized against their wider historical experiences, then alone can they and their Pakhtunwali rightly be understood. This unprejudiced inquiry into the Pakhtun history and culture, I believe, will render the negative image of the Pakhtuns invalid. The world will have a new tolerant, secular and peace-loving Pakhtun. Being aware and conscious of his past, the Pakhtun will be no more won over to put his brother to sword. He will hug the world and embrace the values of civilization without let and hindrance. To quote renowned Pakistani scholar, Dr Ahmad Hassan Dani, "Gandhara has the potential of reviving the dead channels of history.... Let Gandhara of the past stand as a solid foundation for the better Gandhara of the future"