

JOHN BUTT

*A Talib's Tale*

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The Life and Times  
of a **Pashtoon**  
**Englishman**

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It has been a little over a year since *A Talib's Tale* was first published, by Penguin India. In fact, its publication coincided with the first week of what turned out to be pretty much a universal lockdown, in March 2020.

Prior to publication of *A Talib's Tale* in India, Yahya Birt at Kube Publishing had expressed an interest in publishing this account of my Life and Times in the UK. Since the Penguin India version had not been available worldwide, I was happy to take him up on his offer.

Yahya Birt also kindly suggested a chapter on my English origins. The book had been quite top heavy with my Pashtoon connections, so I was happy to add that chapter, for the benefit of the UK publication. I am also grateful to Safia Haleem, my former colleague at the BBC Pashto service, for going through the original, Indian version of *A Talib's Tale*. She also suggested one or two additions, some of which I have been able to incorporate into the new edition.

Since the Penguin publication of *A Talib's Tale*, two of its main protagonists, Abdus Samad and Sinjan—another Pashtoon Englishman who also went by the English name of Sean Jones—have left this world. Abdus Samad already had a chapter to himself, but I am happy that I have been able to do more justice to Sinjan and his elder brother Paddy in this new publication, in particular

the role they played in my going East, and then have the wherewithal to stay there.

It is inevitable that this account of my life and times will be looked at as a memoir, but I don't really see it like that. I see it more as a look at the lives of some key characters in Pashtoon history, over the last couple of hundred years, the impact they had on Pashtoon history and of course the influence they had on me. I would like to think the book is more about them than me.

As the Pashtoon national poet Rahman Baba, who also gets a look into this book wrote:

خدايه څه شول هغه ښکلي ښکلي خلک  
په ظاهر په باطن سپين سپيڅلي خلک

My Lord, what happened to those beautiful souls?  
Shining lights they were, inwardly and outwardly.

**John Butt**  
June 2021

## PROLOGUE

*Those who have been driven out of their homes unjustly, only because they said ‘Our Lord is Allah’.*

*(Al-Hajj 22:40)*

It was the early hours of Thursday, 20 October 2016. Men were keeping watch on the road between Lower and Upper Pachir. Situated on the lower slopes of Spin Ghar, the White Mountain that dominates the scenery in southern Nangarhar province, in the east of Afghanistan, Lower and Upper Pachir had long been in the sights of Daesh.<sup>1</sup> The militant group had already been lodged for some years in the eastern border districts of Achin, Dur Baba, Spinghar and Deh Bala—districts where the Shinwari tribe live, on the border with Pakistan.<sup>2</sup>

The watchmen were alerted by the sound of some men with donkeys. ‘Who goes there?’ they called out. ‘*Mung khro waley yoo,*’ came the reply. The men were taking their donkeys up the mountains to collect wood. It is usual for the people of Pachir to set out in the early hours so they can collect wood from Spin Ghar and

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<sup>1</sup> Daesh is the name whereby the Islamic State group is known in Afghanistan.

<sup>2</sup> Shinwaris are one of the few Pashtoon tribes who live on both sides of the Pakistan–Afghanistan border. While few Shinwaris would call themselves Daesh supporters, Afghans have learned to adapt to whomsoever is in control of their territory.

bring it back before sundown. However, the men soon returned. ‘Daesh have arrived!’ they warned the watchmen.

By the time people had said their early morning prayers in Lower Pachir, families were already getting ready to flee. Who knew how long it would be before Daesh were upon them? In fact, they would probably have swooped on Lower Pachir had it not been for the warning given by the donkey drivers. Armed men from Lower Pachir came out of their houses to defend their territory against the encroaching Daesh forces. Daesh were immeasurably better armed than the local Pachir people. They were also battle ready and hardened. In fact, they were equipped with sniper rifles fitted with telescopes. Their marksmen were strategically positioned in the hills above Lower Pachir. Those mounting the resistance in Lower Pachir suffered twelve wounded, six dead.

Men, women and children from both Upper and Lower Pachir were fleeing for their lives. They had every reason to fear Daesh. The people of Pachir were considered to be at the forefront of the resistance to Daesh. While Daesh follow the Salafi, or Wahabi, model of Islam, brooking no customs that to their mind contravene the practice or Sunna of the Holy Prophet, the people of Pachir are more traditional Hanafi, also Sunni Muslims, allowing visits to shrines and including more Pashtoon customs in their marriages, funerals and other functions.

While some districts in Nangarhar are considered more sympathetic to Daesh—Chaprahar, for example, or the neighbouring province of Kunar—Pachir is considered staunchly anti-Daesh, unsympathetic to Salafi doctrines.

The most important thing for a Pashtoon is his honour. And that honour is inextricably tied to her honour: the honour of Pashtoon womenfolk. Stories coming out of Achin, Deh Bala, Dur Baba—districts already to a certain degree under the control of Daesh—had suggested that enslavement was commonly practised in areas that had been taken over by Daesh. Women had been taken away, so the stories went. Certainly, the people of Pachir believed the stories. ‘Why did you flee?’ I asked one person who had fled from Lower Pachir with his whole family. ‘What do you mean? They take away our women.’ His reply was emphatic. This pointed

to an alarming polarization of Pashtoon society, with some taking women by force and others holding this to be the most reprehensible and dishonourable thing possible—something they would guard against with their lives.

Whole families vacated Pachir with nothing more than the clothes on their back. Women could be seen clutching babies, without even a shawl on their heads—an abject state for a Pashtoon woman to be seen in public. The people of Upper Pachir were also able to make their getaway despite the fact that their territory had been taken over by Daesh. They had the advantage of knowing their land. Daesh forces, said to be numbering a thousand, were not from the area. For the most part, according to reports from areas under their control, Daesh were from the Orakzai tribe, in the Pakistan-administered tribal areas. They were strangers to this part of eastern Afghanistan.

Soon, the people in the district centre of Agam found out about the sudden exodus from Upper and Lower Pachir. They sent all their cars and transport to the villages to help the displaced people reach the eastern metropolis of Jalalabad. Many people from Pachir were already residing there. Most of the newcomers stayed with relatives who were already there, some in makeshift tents, all of them becoming another statistic in the aid agencies' lists of hundreds of thousands of Pashtoons displaced from their homes due to sectarian fighting.

Back in Pachir, young men, the cream of their generation, were left to guard in watchtowers in Lower Pachir, to check the Daesh advance. They could not have known that an onslaught would come from the opposite direction. US forces were based in the airport at Jalalabad. Hearing that Daesh had advanced as far as Upper Pachir, they thought it would be a good idea to bomb them. I do not know how many of their missiles hit the Upper Pachir strongholds of Daesh, but at 11:30 on Saturday morning, a missile fired from a drone hit a tower where five young men of Lower Pachir had been stationed—the front line against Daesh. All five perished. 'You would have been proud of them, had you set eyes on them,' one Pachir person said to me. 'Very little damage was done to the actual watchtower,' one of the men who dug the graves of the young

men told me. ‘But our sons had been positioned on the third floor of the tower. Their bodies were recovered from the ground floor.’<sup>3</sup>



While I had first arrived in Swat in 1970, I made the valley my home in 1985, after I returned from my studies in a madrasa in India. If Kashmir is heaven on earth, Swat, a valley running due north-south to the north of Peshawar, is known as the Switzerland of the East. In the 1970s, Swat had been a favourite hippie destination; in particular, Madyan. It was in Madyan that I made my home in 1985. In the 1970s, one whole quarter of Madyan, near the tributary river that flows down to the Swat River from Bishigram, was called Da Angrezano Kali— the European quarter—by the local people. In 2009, there were no foreigners left, only me, still living in my home next to the river in Madyan. I was on my way from Madyan to the Swat capital of Mingora one day when I caught sight of men, women and children from a village across the river, milling around, disoriented, most of the womenfolk sitting, their backs to the road, overlooking the dazzling Swat River below them. It was a bright, late spring day. The army was bombarding the village of Upper Mamdheri, purported to be a stronghold of Radio Mulla Fazlullah; in fact, it was right next to the Radio Mulla’s own village of Lower Mamdheri.

The strength of the Radio Mulla had been building since 2006, when he was famous for travelling around the area on a white horse. In 2008, he turned from a mulla exhorting people to follow his own puritan version of Islam through his FM radio broadcasts, to one who was taking over Swat territory by force, killing and bombing people and government installations as he went. His demand was the full implementation of *Shariah*—Islamic law. The momentum of this *Shariah* movement had been building since 1994. Then, it had been Fazlullah’s father-in-law Sufi Mohammad

<sup>3</sup> Details of the attack on Pachir were gleaned from an inhabitant who fled the district to put up in a tent perched against his father-in-law’s house in the provincial capital of Jalalabad. Another Pachir resident confirmed the details provided.

who briefly took over most of the Swat valley, as part of his Movement for Implementation of the *Shariah*. In 1994, it had been the local Frontier militias—fellow Pashtoons—who had defused the situation. In 2008, the same Frontier militias found themselves unable to do so. The Pakistan Army was called in. At the time of the exodus from Upper Mamdheri, the Army was still engaged in battle with the militants.

The women and children from across the river looked dazed. I interviewed quite a few of them. They had received no advance notice of the army operation in their village, which included mortar shelling and house-to-house searching—things that no Pashtoon family could willingly expose itself to. The residents had very little time to flee. Most of them left by the cable car that was the only means of transport across the river. Ironically, the cable car used to be operated by Mulla Fazlullah himself, before he found fame as the Radio Mulla. The interviews I conducted were aired on my own PACT radio station, based in Mingora, the same day.

I had set up PACT Radio in Peshawar in 2005, with a grant from Internews. Internews had set up scores of radio stations in Afghanistan, in the wake of the NATO invasion of 2001. PACT Radio initially referred to the Pakistan–Afghanistan Cross-border Radio Training project. Starting off as a radio production and training operation, it turned into the Pakistan–Afghanistan Cross-border Radio Transmission project, with its establishment of a radio station in Mingora in 2008. PACT Radio had been based in Peshawar for the previous three years. Swat was our first practical, live radio enterprise. Our aim was not to counter or confront anyone—that would have been asking for trouble—but to present the traditional face of Islam and Pashtoon practice in the Swat valley—peaceful, inherently moderate, tolerant, generous, hospitable—the picture that had been presented to us hippies in 1970, and which had attracted many of us, myself included, to Islam.

You could put it another way. The face of traditional Pashtoonwali and Islam that we were seeking to present in our radio broadcasts was the one that came to the rescue of the displaced people after they had been forced out of their homes. Whether it was the local displacements, or the general displacement that took

place in May 2009, the people were welcomed with open doors and open hearts of their fellow Pashtoons. It had been in May 2009 that the army had ordered all the residents of Swat to vacate the Valley, to enable them to launch a concentrated operation against the militants. The same feeling of fellowship was in evidence with the Pachir displacement of October 2016, when people from the neighbouring district rushed their vehicles to Pachir to assist the fleeing families. Similarly, when the Swat valley was evacuated, the people of Swabi and Mardan—the districts bordering Swat in the plains—looked upon it as a privilege to make their homes available to the people who had been rendered homeless in Swat. Our Swat radio station was also displaced at this time. We continued to broadcast from our base in Peshawar. We decided to focus on the assistance and refuge being offered to the people of Swat by fellow Pashtoons in the plains.<sup>4</sup> Hospitality amongst the Pashtoons is generous and open-hearted, but it is only for a certain period.

The temporary refuge afforded by one Pashtoon to another creates an impetus for the settlement of the crisis and the return of the displaced people. Indeed, this is what happened, with the displaced Swati people returning to Swat four months later, in September 2019. On the other hand, assistance that comes from relief organizations tends to perpetuate the refugee crisis. We ignored the latter and focused on the former. Not only did it make good sense, it also reflected the essence of Pashtoons life, the spirit that had first attracted me to Islam and to a life amongst the Pashtoon. It was also in line with the PACT Radio motto of ‘Traditional Solutions for Modern Problems.’ The stories that follow are not only about what life was like amongst the Pashtoons. They are about what still is, in spite of the veneer of conflict, their traditional way of life.

John Butt  
Jalalabad, October 2019

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<sup>4</sup> Along with the PACT Radio station, its manager Adnan Rashid was also displaced from the Swat valley at this time. He now works with the Voice of America’s Pashto service in Washington. He and his family were initially accommodated with a family in Mardan, so I have his first-hand account of the hospitality extended to displaced persons from Swat.

## VI

# A TALIB'S TRADE

*The best provision is that which one has worked for, with the labour of one's own hands.*

(Hadith)

1973

I owe a lot to Maulana Khan Afzal, but two things in particular. For one, he instilled in me a love of India. Secondly, he showed me practically that one should always work for one's living.

When I said to Samar Gul in Bara that I was going to the Afridi heartland of Tirah Maidan, he immediately mentioned Khan Afzal. Laiq's family had some land in Tirah, and he and I had decided to move there for the summer. 'That is great,' Samar Gul said, 'you will be able to study with Maulana Khan Afzal.' Like the Sarkai maulvi sahib, Maulana Khan Afzal was an eminent scholar, but at the time he did not have any students residing with him. He was able to devote all his time to tutoring me. I believe it was largely because Tirah was so inaccessible that there were no other students studying with the maulana. Later on, in the late nineties when I visited Maulana Khan Afzal again, he had a good ten to twelve

students studying with him. He had become a focal point for *talibs*, as the Sarkai mauvi sahib had been in the 1970s.

Every day, with my books under my arm, I would make the forty-five-minute walk from Saddar Khel, where Laiq lived, to Landi Kas. Tirah Maidan is a huge, expansive plateau, the like of which there are many in Afghanistan; the Gardez and Logar plateaus are two that spring to mind. The difference with Tirah Maidan is that it is surrounded by richly forested hills, while the hills that surround other Afghan plateaus are mostly bare. Two tributaries of the Bara river meet at the centre of Tirah Maidan, the Malik-Din Khel Bagh. It is the natural capital of Tirah Maidan. The land dips towards that point, as do the streams and the people. From the eastern side, live the tribes of Zakha Khel and the Lower Qambar Khels, known as Shalobaris; on the western side is the huge swathe of Malik-Din Khel territory, and beyond that the Upper Qambar Khels. From Saddar Khel, I would walk down towards the Malik-Din Khel Bagh, then fork right towards Landi Kas, tucked in a hillside between Bagh and Dunga, in Sholobar territory.

I had been studying a Sufi type of Hadith collection entitled *The Path of the Righteous (Riyadhās-Saliheen)*. I say it was Sufi oriented as it was mostly organized according to the virtues that Sufis strive to attain: repentance, patience, sincerity, trust in Allah and steadfastness. It is very spiritually oriented. I am glad I began my study of Hadith with this book. It has remained my favourite collection of Hadith; it is extremely cleansing and refreshing. However, Khan Afzal switched me to the more mainstream and standard *Mishkat'al-Masabih*. This book is arranged more conventionally, according to the various strands of jurisprudence: prayer, fasting and the other forms of worship or interaction with Allah (*ibadat*) followed by one's dealings with other human beings (*muamilat*). In the entire Islamic canon, there is this distinction between the rights of Allah (*huqooq'Allah*) and the rights of one's fellow beings, indeed of all Allah's creatures (*huqooq'al-ibad*). While in Hadith study Khan Afzal went for the more orthodox *Mishkat*, in jurisprudence, his choice of book for my study was distinctly unorthodox. His preference was *Taaleem'al-Islam*, written in Urdu by his own teacher, Mufti Kefayatullah of Delhi. 'Along with learning Islamic

jurisprudence (*fiqh*) you will learn Urdu,' he recommended. For *Taaleemal-Islam* I went outside with his elder son Abdul Hakeem, then a teenager. I guess Abdul Hakeem felt more comfortable teaching me with his father not immediately on hand. We sat on the verge of the field, had a laugh and chatted a lot, while at the same time also reading *Taaleemal-Islam*.

In encouraging me to learn Urdu, it was as though the maulana had a premonition or was goading me in the direction of study in India. It had not been that long, maybe twenty or twenty-five years, since he had returned from studying in the Aminiya madrasa in Delhi. India had rubbed off on him to a considerable degree, in a way making him an unusual Afridi. He even continued to wear a skirt-like garment favoured by Muslims of India (*lungi*) at home. Pashtoons generally consider this garment effeminate. Even the maulana would not be seen in that garment outside the home. I have replicated Maulana Khan Afzal in this regard. Even when I am in Afghanistan I wear a *lungi* in my place of residence; when I am in north India, I wear my *lungi* a little further afield, as far as the local shops; when I am in south India, I wear a *lungi* pretty much all the time. At the time when I was studying with the maulana, I used to ask him a lot about India. In a memorable phrase, he once told me that 'even the dogs of India have manly virtues.' 'What's Delhi like, compared to Peshawar?' I once asked. 'What is Hangu like compared to Peshawar?' he asked rhetorically, referring to a town in the Frontier province, where buses set out towards Tirah. I answered that it was just a tiny town by comparison to Peshawar. 'Well, so is Peshawar tiny compared to Delhi.'

Yet at the same time the maulana was the most staunchly Afridi of all the Panjpiris. He absolutely loved his native Tirah. I am getting ahead of myself here, but when he was expelled from Tirah along with other Panjpiris and resided for a while in Peshawar, he pined for his motherland so much that he used to console himself by reciting poems written by those who had emigrated from Mecca to Medina at the time of the Holy Prophet (*muhajirs*) who sought to express their homesickness for Mecca. He was also invariably cordial with his fellow Afridis, irrespective of whether they subscribed to his Panjpiri views or not. I never saw him take issue

or argue with anyone about matters of dogma. He would enact his duties as the pre-eminent Islamic scholar in Tirah Maidan, in the course of which he would explain how important it was to believe in the oneness of Allah and to follow the Sunna of the Holy Prophet. These two things—*Tauhid* and *Sunna*—are the twin pillars on which Panjpiri dogma is founded. But he would never become aggressive towards those who did not subscribe to Panjpiri beliefs.

When I arrived in Tirah in 1973, the influence of scholars who had studied in India was still palpable. Maulana Khan Afzal was not the only scholar in Tirah who had graduated from India prior to Partition. Another was Maulana Sifat Shah. 'He is an Islamic scholar of great depth,' Maulana Khan Afzal said of Maulana Sifat Shah. Sifat Shah was heavy in physique also, a striking looking man with a full, flaming hennaed beard. At the same time, Maulana Khan Afzal had a word of criticism for him: 'He is not paying attention to his teaching duties.' To Maulana Khan Afzal, the life of an Islamic scholar was supposed to be one of balance between imparting Islamic knowledge and working for a living. Maulana Sifat Shah had tended towards preoccupation with making a living. He had bought himself a male buffalo (*sanda* in Pashto) and used to bring timber from the forest. It was true that he spent little or no time imparting knowledge, though I am sure he did so to his own family members and to those with whom he came into contact, through his gentle character and sense of gravitas.

Scholars such as Sifat Shah, who were of a Deobandi/ Panjpiri persuasion, laid a lot of emphasis on working for their living as opposed to living on handouts, which is possible for a mulla, but does not constitute a very dignified livelihood. Besides, it means the scholar is obliged to those whom he is supposed to be in a position to admonish. Maulana Khan Afzal was the same: openly insistent on working with the labour of his own hand. He had a flourishing practice in homeopathic medicine. On Fridays, he would set up his stall at the Friday market of Tirah, known as Bagh. Scholars such as Sifat Shah and Khan Afzal believed that for their credibility and authority as well as their self-respect to be intact, they should not be dependent on anyone but should be self-sufficient. The Prophet

laid a lot of stress on maintaining this balance between worldly and religious pursuits and not turning one's faith into a source of earning.

Laiq Khan was petrified of two people: in Tirah, Maulana Khan Afzal and in Bara, Samar Gul. These were the two people who were closest to me. He was worried that they would tell it like it was as far as his own intentions were concerned. Once, Samar Gul took me inside his home to meet his womenfolk. It was just a short, perfunctory meeting. They must have been so inquisitive about this Englishman who was studying with their husband. Not only studying, as after a while Laiq and I had left our shop next to the bus stop in Bara and had joined Samar Gul in his watch shop. Laiq Khan got wind of fact that I had been inside Samar Gul's home—it was a rare privilege for an outsider to be introduced to an Afridi's womenfolk. He suspected that Samar Gul was trying to win me over to his inner circle. He became very wary of me becoming too close to my Panjpiri friends. The same applied, even more, to Maulana Khan Afzal. Whenever any disagreement arose between Laiq and myself, he openly said to me that he felt my teacher was egging me on.

In fact, never once did Maulana Khan Afzal speak to me against Laiq and his family. Neither, for that matter, did Samar Gul. It would not have done any good, in any case. As a Panjpiri friend had mentioned, I did not listen to anyone. Even my mother, thousands of miles away in England, said the same thing when someone did eventually pull me to my senses, 'Johnny, I am so glad there was someone you listened to.' Once, when I was on my way to Peshawar for some reason with Laiq, Maulana Khan Afzal took me aside and said to me, 'If you have five rupees to your name, do not trust even me with it.' Of course, he was talking figuratively. He did not wish to speak directly against the Afridi friends I had made in Masma, with whom I had come to Tirah. But he could see they were exploiting me to wrest my inheritance money from me. Later on, when I had wasted all my inheritance and started working for my living, I realized that it would have been much better for me to have foregone my inheritance from the very beginning. But there are some lessons one has to learn the hard way.



Photo courtesy: Abdul Samad

In his element—Pashtoon Englishman in Peshawar city, mid-eighties



Photo courtesy: Amanullah

Mahodand Lake in Upper Swat, where the two Johns spent the first night of their trek.

# X

## THE BOOK OF ALLAH

*And that I should recite the Qur'an (Wa an atluw'al-Qur'an)*

*(Al-Naml 27:92)*

Ever since I started studying with Maulana Daim'al-Haq in 1971, and continued studying with Maulana Zakariya and Maulana Khan Afzal in 1973, it was my dream to go and study with the teacher of my teachers: Shaykh'al-Qur'an Maulana Mohammad Tahir Panjpiri. In the month of Ramadan, 1973, I realized that dream. I went to Panjpir village for the annual study tour (*daura*) of the Holy Qur'an.

When you have heard much about a person you tend to build an angelic image in your mind. Often, when you see that person in real life, you might be disappointed that his appearance does not live up to one's expectations. Not so Shaykh'al-Qur'an. He looked like a saint. He dressed simply. He wore a simple white cap, such as would normally be worn by any Pashtoon from the mountain valleys of Swat or Dir. No turban or anything ostentatious. His beard was like pure white silk. Not only was his appearance striking, his command of his native Pashto was total. He spoke the pure Pashto that people in the plains learn from their mothers. Pashto

is a strange language. Generally, the more one becomes educated the worse one's Pashto becomes since it becomes adulterated with English and Urdu words. This was not the case if one received one's education at the feet of Maulana Mohammad Tahir. One's Pashto became more colourful, richer, purer in the company of the Shaykh. Added to his colourful vocabulary was the fact that he spoke with the attractive lilt of his native Swabi—the district where the village of Panjpir is situated, on the banks of the River Indus.

People are often amazed at what they generously call the pure Pashto that I speak. 'Where did you learn such Pashto?' they ask me. They are even more amazed at my answer: 'In madrasa.' Generally, Pashtoon nationalists look at mullas and madrasas as the antithesis of Pashtoonwali. Be that as it may, it certainly was not the case with Shaykh'al-Quran. Quite apart from learning the Qur'an—of course Panjpir was the place where one could really explore the Book of Allah—by attending the madrasa in Panjpir one came to appreciate the Pashto language even more. The Panjpir maulana sahib was not only Shaykh'al-Quran. In the same way as Maulana Mahmud'al-Hasan was known as Shaykh'al-Hind—the shaykh of Indian nationalism—Maulana Mohammad Tahir also deserved to be called Shaykh'al-Pashto—the Master of Pashto.

So great was Maulana Mohammad Tahir's belief in the Pashto language that he did one extraordinary thing. He recited the Qur'an in Pashto. While his students kept their eyes fixed on the holy book and its Arabic text, he would be running through the Pashto translation without any reference to the original Arabic. Read the holy book in Arabic, but understand it and preach it in Pashto, he seemed to be telling his students; as the Qur'an says, in the language of one's people (*bilasani qaumihi*). (*Ibrahim* 14:4)

So much for the Pashto and the person of the maulana, now we come to the Panjpiri part. As you will have gathered, rank- and-file Pashtoons frowned on the name Panjpiri. 'Panjpir' means five *pirs*, a *pir* being a spiritual guide. That is what seemed suspicious to Pashtoons. It sounded as if the Panjpiris had five imams, instead of the four imams of Sunni Islam. 'Where does the fifth *pir* come from?' would be a typical comment against the Panjpiris. But in fact, Panjpir is the name of the village from where the Panjpir

maulana hails. It is said in Panjpir village that the village got its name from five holy men—in other words *pirs*—who had lived in a cave on the mountain that dominates Panjpir village. It is strange how the name Panjpir crops up in different places. There are five *pirs*—known in Pashto as *pinzuh peeran*—buried in the village of Hazarkhanay, on the outskirts of Peshawar, regarding whom a famous song has been sung:

*Da khar puh khwa, khwa, khwa ke Pinzuh peeran dee yera*

Right next to the city, you know There are five *pirs*, my friend.

So in fact there was nothing sinister about being a Panjpiri. All it meant was that one was associated with that particular village, either because one was from the village or because one had studied in the Panjpir madrasa. At that time, however, it was tantamount to abuse to call someone a Panjpiri. The Panjpiris, for their part, far from shying away from a label that they realized irked others, revelled in it. Take the beginning of the chapter of the Qur'an entitled The Believers (*al-Mu'minun*) which gives the qualities of true believers: they are humble in their prayer; they eschew frivolity; they give charity; they safeguard their chastity; and they keep their promises (*al-Mu'minun* 23:1-9). Five qualities? Panj pir! Shaykh'al-Qur'an would emphasize the point jokingly and point out that one had to be Panjpiri—one endowed with these five qualities—in order to be a good Muslim.

It was much the same with Abdul Ghaffar Khan's Red Shirts, as the Khudai Khidmatgars were called by the British. The British pounced on the fact that they wore red shirts. In fact, the shirts that the Khudai Khidmatgars used to don were red because of the natural colour—derived from the root of the dwarf palm—in which their homespun cotton clothes were dyed. 'The natural white colour of the homespun cotton used to become dirty very quickly, so we dyed them red,' Ghaffar Khan's son-in-law Yahya Jan explained to me. When it became clear to the Khudai Khidmatgars that the British government was seeking to malign them by dubbing them Red Shirts, then they also called themselves by

the same name, *sur posh*, with pride and a good deal of relish. They took perverse pleasure in the fact that by using this name they were annoying the British. The moral of the story? Do not pick on faults of the Pashtoons that you object to: they will only accentuate those faults in order to annoy you.

A mountain and a river: that sums up the village of Panjpir. The village is nestled on the mountainside, but the madrasa of Panjpir lies on the banks of the river. Normally, the river is no more than a stream. In those days, in the early seventies, one had to cross the river by foot, there being no bridge across it. During the rainy season, when the floodwaters came down from the mountains to the north of Panjpir, the river turned into a torrent. Even the madrasa was prone to flooding at that time. At such times, one had to approach Panjpir from a roundabout route, through the neighbouring Zeda village.

I do not know the exact numbers, but there were a good 1,500 to 2,000 students in attendance when Shaykh'al-Qur'an gave his annual series of Qur'an lectures during Ramadan. Of these, 80 to 90 per cent would have been from Afghanistan. Most of the others were from Frontier districts bordering Afghanistan—Bajaur, some maybe from Dir, adjacent to the Swat valley. As the years unfolded, I was to realize that this preference, amongst Afghan Pashtoons in particular, for madrasa education had a lot to do with the manner in which secular education had been introduced in Afghanistan. Particularly during the time of Amir Amanullah Khan (1919–29), school education was introduced along very secular lines in Afghanistan, with girls who went to school being forced to take off their veils. Such acts of enforced secularization created a perception amongst sections of the rural population that school education corrupted the values of the youth, that it took them away from their traditions and made them less worthy Muslims and Pashtoons.

While madrasa students distrust the school system of education, the opposite is also true. Amongst those educated in schools there is also a perception that madrasas are antiquated institutions that practice rote learning and produce mullas who are only good for the mosque or the madrasa and cannot make any

meaningful contribution in mainstream life. This is not the case. In fact, a madrasa education is akin to a classical education in the West. Old-fashioned it may be, in need of reform, definitely, but meaningful nonetheless. It was a great regret of mine that despite studying with the Jesuits in England I had not concentrated on a classical education. The Jesuits are masters of the classics. At Stonyhurst, where I went to school, some of the Jesuit priests would even talk to each other in Latin! I guess by immersing myself in a madrasa education, I compensated for my failing to pursue a classical education as a boy in England.

To my mind, a classical education is a good education. It is real education. It enlightens you in every walk of life. Philosophy, logic, science, drama, grammar, history, theology, sociology, literature, medicine, political theory—there is not a single field of learning that is untouched by a classical education. In the West, after receiving a classical education, you are able to advance in whichever walk of life you wish since you have become well versed in the basics. A legitimate criticism of a madrasa education might be that it is too tilted towards theology. It does not deal with other areas that classical works of Islam have covered. Madrasa students may graduate from madrasa without, for example, knowing anything about the ground-breaking work of Ibn Khaldun on the lessons of history, the causes of the rise and fall of empires. Eminent figures such as Ibn Khaldun are more appreciated by Western orientalists than they are by the Islamic scholars who teach in madrasas. It is not as if the work of Ibn Khaldun is in any way profane. It can be seen as an elaboration and explanation of a verse of the Quran, ‘Say, “Lord, Sovereign of all sovereignty. You bestow sovereignty on whom You will and take it away from whom you please.”’ (*al-Imran* 3:26)

Still, this does not make madrasa education any less worthwhile as classical education. A madrasa student can easily branch off into other areas of study, on the basis of his or her classical madrasa education. I cannot recall Shaykh'al-Qur'an delving into the works of Ibn Khaldun, but he did explore works that lie beyond the normal ambit of a madrasa curriculum. For example, the *Life of Animals* (*Hayat'al-Haywan'al-Kubra*) by Al-Damiri, a classical work on zoology. Its starting point is the verse of the Qur'an that points

“I was a strange, unconventional talib – student of Islam. From the beginning, I learnt things not in a classroom but from anyone I met.”

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John Butt was born in Trinidad in 1950. At the age of nine, he came to boarding school in England. His restless spirit did not settle down to life in England and in 1969, he took the hippie trail to India. In the Pashtoon border regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan, he converted to Islam and started a second education, as a traditional talib-student of Islam.

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