

## AN OVERVIEW OF BRITISH ADMINISTRATIVE SET-UP AND STRATEGY IN THE KHYBER 1849-1947

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### Abstract

*British rule in the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent, particularly its effective control and administration in the tribal belt along the Pak-Afghan border, is a fascinating story of administrative genius and pragmatism of some of the finest British officers of the time. The unruly land that could not be conquered or permanently subjugated by warriors and conquerors like Alexander, Changez Khan and Nadir Shah, these men from Europe controlled and administered with unmatched efficiency. An overview of the British administrative set-up and strategy in Khyber Agency during the years 1849-1947 would help in assessing British strengths and weaknesses and give greater insight into their political and military strategy. The study of the colonial system in the tribal belt would be helpful for administrators and policy makers in Pakistan in making governance of the tribal areas more efficient and effective particularly at a turbulent time like the present.*

### Introduction

Some facts of history have been so romanticized that it would be hard to know fact from fiction. British advent into the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent and their north-western expansion right up to the hard and inhospitable hills on the Western Frontier of Pakistan is a story that would look unbelievable today if one were to imagine the wildness of the territory in those times. The most fascinating aspect of the British rule in the Indian Subcontinent is their dealing with the fierce and warlike tribesmen of the northwest frontier and keeping their land under their effective control till the very end of their rule in India.

The land where warriors like Alexander, Changez Khan and Nadir Shah had to struggle and great dynasties like the Mughals faced difficulties in maintaining their control was occupied and administered by the British with relative ease and efficiency.

An overview of the British administrative set-up and strategy in the Khyber during the years 1849-1947 would help in assessing its strengths and weaknesses and give greater insight to our tribal administrators into the effective political and military strategy that enabled the colonial power to evolve an efficient system of administration in our tribal areas. They say history is a corrective force, so let history correct us and guide us in our

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dealing with the tribes in what is administratively called Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Provincially Administered Tribal Areas (PATA) on the Western Frontier of Pakistan.

### **The British Relations with the Khyber Tribes**

The historical name Khyber applies to an area surrounded by a chain of lofty mountains, through which the celebrated Khyber Pass runs through from Peshawar, the capital of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province of Pakistan, in the east right into Afghanistan in the west. To the north of the Khyber Agency stand the Landi Kotal and Torkham hills bounded by the Kabul River and the Mohmand tribes as its neighbours; to the west is *spin ghar* surrounded by the Shinwari tribes of Afghanistan; to the east is the settled district of Peshawar, and to the south lie the Orakzai hills. The Khyber Agency lies between 33° 32' and 34° 51' north latitude and between 70° 37' and 77° 56' east longitude. The total area of the Agency is 2,576 square kilometers, with a maximum length of 128 kilometers and a maximum breadth of 64 kilometers<sup>1</sup>, while the total population of the Agency, according to the 1998 Census, was 5,34,383. The projected figure for the population of Khyber Agency in the year 2002 is 6,45,856. This estimate, however, is tentative and based on the 1981-98 intercensal Growth Rate for Khyber Agency.<sup>2</sup> The elevated hilly areas of the Agency are drained by the Bara, Bazaar, Darra and Khyber *tois* into the Peshawar Valley, whereas the Khankae *toi* flows into the Kohat district and Kharmana empties into the Kurram River.<sup>3</sup>

The British first came into contact with the Khyber tribes during the first Anglo-Afghan War. Later on, when Peshawar became a British possession in 1849 as a part of the annexed Sikh State of Lahore, the British tried to deal amicably with the tribes in and around the Khyber Pass and the tribes also responded positively to a great extent. Many Afridis took service in the British Indian Army and helped them in crushing several anti-British uprisings. In the beginning, British dealings with the Afridis and other tribes in the Khyber Pass were maintained through influential men of Peshawar called the *Arbabs*. These intermediaries, however, proved unreliable being prone to intrigues against the British. To enhance their own importance, they often fomented unrest among the Afridis and prevented friendly relations between the tribes and the British

<sup>1</sup> Mumtaz Ali, "Political and Administrative Development of Tribal Areas: A Focus on Khyber & Kurram" (PhD diss., Area Study Center for Russia, China and Central Asia, University of Peshawar), 4.

<sup>2</sup> "Population Estimates by Agencies/Frontier Regions of FATA: 1981-2002," *Bureau of Statistics*, NWFP, Peshawar, <http://www.nwfpbos.sdnpk.org/fds/2000/8.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Mumtaz, 4.

Indian Government.<sup>4</sup> British officers in the Khyber like Major Robert Warburton were not satisfied with the working of the British system of administration based on dealing through intermediaries. Warburton was convinced that the majority of the wars and fights between the British Indian Government and the tribesmen on the frontier were due entirely to the machinations of the Arbabs and others employed as middlemen in dealing with the tribesmen.<sup>5</sup>

The system of dealing with the tribes through middlemen persisted for a long time and produced totally unsatisfactory results. The system was inherited from the Sikh rulers of the Punjab and was basically due to British ignorance of Pushto language. The role of the middlemen, however, was reduced in the last 50 years of the British rule as the language barrier was removed, many of the British administrators having acquired proficiency in the Pushto language making it possible for them to deal directly with the tribes. The improvement was the result of Lord Curzon's idea of having a separate North West Frontier Province, detached from the Punjab administration. The creation of the new province created a sort of intimacy between the British officers stationed there and the local Pakhtuns, which greatly facilitated the British officers in removing the language barrier. Thus the role of the middleman was eliminated.<sup>6</sup>

The British, unlike the numerous other invaders of the subcontinent, meant business. They were not easily thwarted by adversities. They had realized that the Khyber Pass and the territories around it were not the kind of place that would be presented to them on a silver platter. They tried several policies to bring the Frontier under their effective control. The two variants of British policy in the tribal belt were the masterly Inactivity Policy or the Closed Border Policy and the Forward Policy, of which the latter was more aggressive.<sup>7</sup>

British policy on the Northwest Frontier passed through different stages. For over a quarter of a century, after the annexation of the Punjab, the Punjab government followed what came to be known as the "Closed Border Policy." The main idea behind this policy was to guard the border (with the tribal belt) closely with a view to keeping tribal raids and consequent reprisals by way of military expeditions to the minimum. Non-aggression on tribal territory and non interference in tribal affairs were the declared objectives of this policy. For defensive purposes, a military force called the Punjab Frontier

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<sup>4</sup> Lal Baha, *NWFP Administration under British Rule 1901-1919* (Islamabad: National Commission on Historical and Cultural Research, 1978), 52.

<sup>5</sup> Olaf Caroe, *The Pathans: 550 BC-1957 AD*, with an Epilogue on Russia by the Author (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1985), 357.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Teepu Mahabat Khan, *The Land of Khyber*, ed. Prof. Dr Qabil Khan (Peshawar: Uzbek Publishers, 2001), 36.

Force was raised under the supreme control of the Government of the Punjab, which in 1886 was amalgamated with the regular army. The existing forts were repaired and new ones were built along the administrative boundary and were connected with each other by a military road. At the same time, various conciliatory measures were adopted. Agreements were made with the tribes, obliging them to maintain peaceful and friendly relations with the British Indian Government in return for subsidies and allowances. The tribesmen were allowed to enter into the British territory and to trade freely but British officers were instructed not to cross into the tribal territory. However, the tribesmen frequently violated these agreements and the British had to stop their allowances, impose fines and blockades on them, and when all these proved unavailing, they also had to send expeditions into tribal territory. Between 1849 and 1899, the Punjab government undertook as many as 62 minor and major expeditions into the tribal territories.<sup>8</sup>

The Closed Border Policy finally had to be abandoned in favour of what came to be known as the "Forward Policy." The change was directly linked to the Great Game<sup>9</sup> in Central Asia. The Russian expansion in Central Asia and its advance towards the borders of Afghanistan had alarmed the British. The defence of India had to be organized accordingly and this could be achieved by the occupation of the scientific frontier based on the Kabul-Ghazni-Kandahar line. For this it was necessary to control the passes in the north-western hills, to improve communications both in tribal and British settled territories, and to set up advanced military posts in the tribal region with a view to facilitating the occupation of the strategic line. The implementation of this new policy involved the establishment of workable relationship with the Amir of Afghanistan and control over the Frontier tribes.<sup>10</sup>

The Forward Policy was introduced for the tribal territory under Lord Lansdowne (1888-94) and Lord Elgin (1894-99). The government had already acquired control of the Khyber Pass during the Second Anglo Afghan War. The Khyber Agency was created in 1878 and the British Political Agent conducted relations with the tribes.<sup>11</sup> Till the creation of Northwest Frontier Province in 1901 (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), the Political Agent for Khyber was designated as Political Officer and enjoyed an exceptional position and responsibility, more crucial than the role of Political Agents in other Agencies. He could correspond directly with the Government of India in matters related

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<sup>8</sup> Baha, 4-5.

<sup>9</sup> The term "the Great Game" is derived from the writings of a British scout named Arthur Conolly who set out from Moscow in 1829, posing as a trader, to determine the feasibility of crossing Central Asia *en route* to India. Four years later, he wrote a detailed account of his harrowing expedition. He wrote to a friend that he wished to play a part in "a great game" to frustrate the Russian schemes to conquer the region.

<sup>10</sup> Baha, 5-6.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

to the state of affairs in Kabul. In fact, it was a part of his duties to send regular reports about the activities of the Afghan officials and the important events taking place in Afghanistan that could have a bearing on the tribal territory under British control. But in routine matters, he was to communicate with the Government of India through the Commissioner of Peshawar.<sup>12</sup>

The active forward moves of the British Empire into the tribal belt alarmed the tribesmen who feared, most of all, that the British were out to destroy their cherished independence. Their reaction often took the shape of armed uprisings during which a series of sporadic battles were fought throughout the tribal belt, including the Khyber Pass, between the tribesmen and the British Indian Army. But despite the colossal British Imperial might and its myth of invincibility, the colonial power failed to subjugate the primitive tribal people with all their “carrot and stick” approach. They remained at loggerheads with the tenacious tribesmen for quite a long time and led several military expeditions against them.<sup>13</sup>

The tribesmen, though ill equipped, were masters of mountain warfare. Their terrain and their mountains proved to be a part of their war strategy and weaponry. In the absence of any deterrent weapons, they even made use of the rocks and stones and one of their effective strategies was to roll down huge boulders from the hilltop to crush the enemies passing through the gorges below to make up for the deficiency in having modern and more effective weapons possessed by their enemies. Despite all the power and might of the British administrative machinery in the Khyber Pass, their fortifications, their militias and regular army, and their powerful political paraphernalia, the tribesmen never lost an opportunity to attack the weak spots of the British administration in the Pass, whether it was to block a road for a dacoity, stop and loot a train or ambush a small detachment of British forces and attack it for rifles, or even storm a picket or the quarter-guard of the British camp for the capture of rifles and magazines.<sup>14</sup>

Tribes in the middle section of the frontier with Afghanistan, living between the Kabul and Gomal rivers, were comparatively harder to control on account of their intensely democratic organization. It is in this area that about two-thirds of the British Indian Army was stationed in Cantonments near the tribal areas for what was termed as “border police work” to prevent the tribal raids in the British administered settled districts. The tribal raids were motivated partly by economic reasons and partly because of the fanatical intolerance of the tribes to even the slightest control from an alien “*kafir*”

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<sup>12</sup> Dr. Mohammad Anwar Khan, *The Role of NWFP in the Freedom Struggle* (Lahore: Research Society of Pakistan, 2000), 317.

<sup>13</sup> Teepu, 36-37.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 37-38.

(infidel) government.<sup>15</sup> In order to control the tribesmen, the British felt compelled to grant them a measure of self-rule. Whereas in the cities, towns and adjoining countryside the British writ prevailed, the tribal areas continued to be governed by the ancient customs and laws of the Pakhtuns. The British also tried to keep them in good humour by granting them subsidies and stipends but even then they proved to be a source of continuous trouble for the British administrators.<sup>16</sup> The British had become so frightened and suspicious of these Pakhtun tribes that they used to say that if you find yourself in a hut with a snake and a Pathan, kill the Pathan first.<sup>17</sup>

### **Mechanisms of Administration in the Khyber**

Khyber remained a trouble spot for the British throughout the colonial rule. It could be pacified only by a large show of arms but once the invading forces were withdrawn, it would revert to its usual anarchic state under the Afridi and Shinwari Pukhtuns. The tribal snipers would gang up in the Khyber hills and once in a while come right down to attack Peshawar.<sup>18</sup>

Before the establishment of the Khyber Agency and the appointment of the Political Agent, the dealings with the Khyber tribes were conducted by the Deputy Commissioner of Peshawar through the Political Officer of Khyber. In 1902, the post of Political Officer was converted into that of a Political Agent and Major C. Roos Keppel was appointed to the post.<sup>19</sup> The British also felt the need for raising a force to protect the settled districts against the fully armed trans-border tribes who were the most notorious raiders and plunderers in history. The task was assigned to the Border Police and the Frontier Force – better known under a later and more honoured name of Frontier Constabulary. In case of serious trouble, it could always get support from the regular army. The defence of the border was not always passive and sometimes counter attacks in the shape of military expeditions were necessary and therefore, military expeditions into the tribal territory were frequent and they

<sup>15</sup> Dr Azmat Hayat Khan, *The Durand Line: Its Geostrategic Importance*, ed. M. Y. Effendi (Peshawar: Area Study Center, University of Peshawar & Hanns Seidal Foundation, 2000), 24.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>17</sup> H. R. Seccombe, “Can the United Nations Rid the World of the Scourge of Drugs” (presentation at the meeting of Families and Friends for the Drugs Law Reform at Canberra, May 25, 2000), <http://www.ffdlr.org.au/commentary/UN%20ridding%20the%20world%20of%20Drugs.htm>

<sup>18</sup> Gordon Sinclair, *To the Frontier: A Journey to the Khyber Pass* (USA: Henry Holt & Company, 1992), 79.

<sup>19</sup> Badshah Gul Wazir and Jahangir Khan Mohmand, *Futuristics of Tribal Administration* (Peshawar: Pakistan Academy for Rural Development, 1995), 28.

were an effective answer to tribal misbehaviour.<sup>20</sup> But the British claimed that their military expeditions were more humanizing and civilizing in nature rather than punitive. They were undertaken in response to tribal invasions and inroads, carrying off of peaceful persons and holding them to ransom, murder of frontier officers, outrages on women, and the failure of the tribal elders to “come and reason” with the authorities and accept the British terms, usually a fine in money or arms for surrender. In return, the tribesmen would be offered education facilities, medical assistance, work in road making, and subsidies and allowances.<sup>21</sup>

But the use of force by the army or civil authority was not the only way to tackle the troublemakers. The British administrators were not devoid of positive ideas, which materialized in the shape of written agreements and grants of allowances. In the first twenty years, agreements were concluded with almost every tribe, securing for the British Government what it needed to secure. A typical agreement would contain a number of clauses; one general clause declaring friendship and goodwill, followed by the details of services required from the tribes such as the security of the border, control of raiders, protection of communication, denying sanctuary to outlaws, and the last clause would be about the grant of annual allowances contingent on good behaviour. These agreements were always concluded in open *jirgas* and the *maliks* and other elders of the tribes would affix their seals or often their thumb impressions to it.<sup>22</sup>

#### *British Administrative Structure*

To keep the tribes under control, the allowances, known as *mumajjib*, were an important element in the British tribal administration in the early days. But these lost their importance gradually when people started to prefer greater economic benefits like service in the army and civil irregular corps or tribal police. These allowances are still paid and though some people object to them as “blackmail” they are still paid to the tribes to induce good behaviour in the absence of any legal code in force in their territories and in some cases as compensation for their losses. The best example of its compensatory nature was in the case of the Khyber Pass Afridis whose original allowances were granted in lieu of the tolls, which the tribe itself formerly levied by force on all traffic through the Pass. Moreover, it could not be termed as blackmail as the payments were conditional on good behaviour and were liable to suspension or forfeiture either in part or in whole in case of any misbehaviour or offense. The suspension of the allowances actually proved quite effective in keeping the

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<sup>20</sup> Sir Olaf Caroe, *The Pathans*, 348.

<sup>21</sup> Lt. Gen. Sir George Macmunn, *The Romance of the Indian Frontiers* (Quetta: Nisa Traders, 1978), 166-67.

<sup>22</sup> Caroe, 349.

Afridis under control.<sup>23</sup> If at all it could be termed as “blackmail”, it was blackmail on both the sides; the tribesmen making the British pay these allowances and the British making them return the favour by keeping the Pass safe for traffic or else, they would stop the payments.

Apart from the stoppage of allowances, there was *bandish* or blockade – exerting economic pressure by excluding a tribe from markets, land or grazing in the neighbouring district. This method was quite effective but slow and hard to enforce as the administrative border between the settled districts and *ghair illaqa* (independent tribal territory) was often artificial in the sense that it meant little to the people on either side of the line.<sup>24</sup>

Yet another method to enforce good behaviour was the *bramta* or *barampta*, a word of Central Asian *Turki* origin meaning the seizure of persons, animals or property belonging to a tribe to exert pressure for restitution. This method was applied under the principle of the Collective Responsibility of the tribes for any wrongdoing by any of its members or the tribe as a whole. The *bramta* technique worked only if applied to the tribal section actually responsible for any offense or to which offenders actually belonged. The smaller the tribal group or section was on which pressure was put, the more effective it proved in yielding results.<sup>25</sup>

In the Khyber Pass area, a local levy, the *kbassadar* Force, was established for the purpose of policing the area. Only the *kbassadars* and not the army or militia could directly deal with the tribes and go to the villages for summons etc. At the same time, for the purpose of dealing with the local tribes, a representative class called *maliks* was also created. The village elders were also recognized as intermediaries between the government and their villages and clans. Recruitment in these multiple forces, the roads and railways contracts and construction works offered tremendous employment opportunities to the poor and penniless local tribals. The *maliks* and other elders of the tribes were given handsome allowances and subsidies (*munwajib*). The land requisitioned for roads and railways and other government concerns were acquired against cash annual payments. In this way, the British brought about a socio-economic transformation among the local tribes. But though somewhat settled and subjugated the tribals were not completely tamed. They were left with a real sense of internal independence and their centuries’ old traditional tribal code, *Pakhtunwali* or *rivaj* remained immune to undue interference. No attempt was made to replace the local customary laws by the introduction of English or Roman law, as was done all over the rest of the Indian Subcontinent. They were spared the agonies of litigation, trials,

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 349-50.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 350.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.



conviction, imprisonment and even executions. Their own *jirga* system was considered a better dispensation.<sup>26</sup>

Although the land along the Khyber Pass was a land of vendettas and a foe would never lose an opportunity to shoot at his foe but the British authorities had declared the road through the Khyber Pass “out of bounds” for blood feuds. This rule was generally observed by the Khyber Pass tribes due to the fear of heavy penalty for its violation.<sup>27</sup>

Thus the road through the Pass was “free from any acts of tribal reprisals.” A British writer, Gordon Sinclair, during his visit to the Khyber Pass in pre-partition period was told by a local tribesman:

“No Sahib; no man is ever shot on the road. It is free ground. We give our word of honor. If Pathan shoots Pathan here in his own land, that is our business and we do what we will about it. But if a man is shot on the road, that brings in the army. The road is a British road, Sahib, and if a man is killed on the road then the family of the man who killed him are fined and there is much trouble.”<sup>28</sup>

The average fine, according to Gordon Sinclair, was equivalent to 80 dollars and seizure of a rifle.<sup>29</sup>

### *The Judicial System*

The British judicial system with its lengthy process, lawyers, appeals and European scale of crime values was not in line with the Pathan sentiments, particularly in the tribal territory. The difficult procedure and the technicalities associated with the British judicial system like the law of evidence would sometimes lead to the acquittal of persons whom everybody knew to be guilty and at times to the harassment of an enemy. There would be many people cunning enough to misuse its technicalities. The sanctions and penalties imposed often conflicted with the local customs and traditions. The whole process of law under the British judicial system was regarded as fussy, niggling and even unjust.<sup>30</sup>

In 1872, an attempt was made to make necessary adjustment by the introduction of the Frontier Crimes Regulations (FCR), authorizing settlement by customary methods of quarrels arising out of the blood-feuds, disputes about women and issues pertaining to Pathan code of honour. Even in the settled districts, the Magistrates were allowed to withdraw the case from the ordinary courts and submit them to arbitration by a *jirga*, a group of local

<sup>26</sup> Teepu, 41.

<sup>27</sup> Sir Percy Sykes, *Sir Mortimer Durand: A Biography* (Lahore: Al-Beruni, 1977), 220.

<sup>28</sup> Sinclair, 74-75.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>30</sup> Caroe, 352-53.

elders designated by the Magistrate and acceptable to both parties to decide about the guilt or innocence of the accused in a criminal case or on the points at issue in a civil dispute. The *jirga* was actually a kind of a jury, not bound by the law of evidence and independent to work according to its own methods and enquiries to reach a decision. The sentences, however, were awarded by the courts. The lawyers did not like the Regulations for professional lawyers were completely excluded from *jirga* proceedings. This was the arrangement in the settled districts of NWFP. In the tribal territories, however, the Frontier Crimes Regulations was operated not as a parallel system but as the sole substitute code.<sup>31</sup>

#### *The Frontier Corps and the Khyber Rifles*

To maintain law and order in the Khyber Pass, to keep the Pass open for traffic and escort caravans, and to prevent the tribesmen from raiding into the settled districts, the Political Agent of Khyber needed an armed and disciplined force composed wholly or partly of the local tribesmen. Thus were raised irregular forces in the shape of militias and scouts collectively known as the Frontier Corps.<sup>32</sup> The main idea behind the establishment of the Frontier Corps was:

1. to buy the loyalty of the tribesmen and use their weapons against disloyal tribes.
2. to save the army from maintaining law and order in the tribal areas and have a cheaper and effective force organized from amongst the tribesmen.
3. garrisoning forts, posts, and pickets, and patrolling the roads to ensure their safety.<sup>33</sup>

The duties assigned to the Frontier Corps during peacetime were to conduct *bramptas*, i.e., to recover property or proclaimed offenders from tribal areas, to carry out *gashts* (patrolling) in friendly or hostile areas to assert the writ of the government, and to help the administration in maintaining law and order in the tribal areas. During war time, they were to protect and if necessary clear the lines of communication. The list of their duties is further extended nowadays and they actually assist the regular army in several aspects both during war and peace.<sup>34</sup>

Of all these irregular forces, the Khyber Rifles, known initially as the *jezailchis*, attained legendary fame and prominence.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 353-54.

<sup>32</sup> Charles Chenevix Trench, *The Frontier Scouts* (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1986), 6.

<sup>33</sup> Headquarters Frontier Corps NWFP, *Guide for Officers* (Peshawar: Frontier Corps NWFP, N. D.), 9.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 9-10.

The Khyber Rifles is one of the oldest and historic units of Militia of the Frontier Corps NWFP. Originally known as Khyber *Jezailechis*, the Khyber Rifles were raised in November 1878 by Captain Gais Ford. It was a semi-Khassadars Force carrying their own rifle (Jezaile). The purpose of raising this militia was to prevent the tribes molesting the line of control of the Second Afghan War expeditionary force (1878). Captain Gais Ford remained in command of Khyber Rifles up to 1881 when he handed over command to Sardar Mohammad Aslam Khan (First Muslim Commandant). Sardar Mohammad Aslam Khan, who later became Lt. Col. Nawab Sir Mohammad Aslam Khan, commanded the Corps from 1881 to 1897 for 16 years, the longest period of command in the history of Khyber Rifles. Up to 1887 the Khyber Jezailechis served only in Khyber Agency. In that year they were renamed as the Khyber Rifles and they could now be deputed to serve wherever required. This change enabled the personnel of the Khyber Rifles to distinguish themselves in various expeditions and operations in which the troops took part.<sup>35</sup>

The headquarters of the Khyber Rifles was at Landi Kotal and their fundamental role was to guard the historic Khyber Pass. The three main garrisons of the regiment were Landi Kotal at the western end of the Pass, Fort Maude to the east and Ali Masjid in the centre.<sup>36</sup>

The badge of the Corps is symbolic of the area and the people it relates to. It is comprised of two crossed Afghan daggers with the words KHYBER above and RIFLES below. While the Indian Army as a whole was noted for its colourful and elaborate dress uniforms prior to 1914, the various units of the Frontier Corps wore only plain khaki drill uniforms and turbans.<sup>37</sup>

In the beginning, its strength was one officer, four hundred infantry, and forty-eight mounted infantry. Till 1890, they were equipped with their own *jezails* for which they were paid by the Government. In 1890, they were issued the service patron rifles, the Sniders, in recognition of their services outside the Khyber Agency.<sup>38</sup>

The duties assigned to the Khyber Rifles included the protection of the traffic moving through the Khyber Pass, picketing the hills on either side of the Pass, and escorting the camel caravans between the Afghan Frontier and Fort Jamrud at the eastern end of the Pass. This irregular force was extremely irregular in the true sense, unshaven, unkempt, with no uniform but a red tag

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<sup>35</sup> "Khyber Rifles," *Wikipedia* (Online), [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khyber\\_Rifles](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khyber_Rifles) (accessed May 2, 2007).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Teepu, 80-81.

sewn on to the back of their *pagri* (turban) to distinguish them from the rest of the Afridi tribesmen dressed exactly alike.<sup>39</sup>

The commandant of the Khyber *jezailchis*, Major (later Colonel) Mohammad Aslam Khan, was a man of great character and ability. He was an Afghan of the Sadozai section of the Royal Durrani tribe and as the Afridis had been supporting the Sadozai claim to the throne, his prestige was enormous among the tribesmen. He did a lot to train and discipline the *jezailchis*, armed them with Snider rifles, replacing their *jezails*, and renamed them as the Khyber Rifles. They were provided with practical, loose-fitting *khaki* uniforms and a mounted infantry troop was also added to the original infantry companies. Both Major Mohammad Aslam, Commandant of the Khyber Rifles, and Major Robert Warburton, the Political Agent of Khyber Agency, had great trust in the Khyber Rifles.<sup>40</sup>

The Khyber Rifles, in their early history, perfectly justified Mohammad Aslam's and Warburton's pride in them, except for a single event in 1882 when for purely administrative reasons it was decided by the British authorities that the fort at Ali Masjid, garrisoned by a company of the Malik Din Khel Afridis, should be abandoned and the company should be moved to Jamrud. On that occasion, the Khyber Rifles men disobeyed the orders because a *Subedar* and a *Jamadar*, two officers of the Rifles, deduced the opinion that the Government was on the run and went around, Quran in hand, urging their men to desert with rifles rather than obey the order. However, a loyal *Havildar* (Sergeant) defied the two superior officers and managed to get the company back to Jamrud. Apart from this single instance of disobedience and defiance, they did extremely well. They made Khyber far safer than the environs of Peshawar. When on one occasion, the then Commander-in-Chief of the British Indian Forces, Lord Roberts and his Quarter Master General, rode with the Political Agent of Khyber from one end of the Khyber Pass to the other, reputedly the most dangerous Pass in Asia at that time, escorted only by two troopers of the Khyber Rifles, the Quarter Master General was amazed to see this and remarked: "If this were to be told in England, or to any officer of the old Punjab School, they would never believe it."<sup>41</sup>

However, most of this loyalty was personal to Warburton – a half Pakhtun with Irish father and Afghan mother – and Mohammad Aslam Khan, the Commandant of the Khyber Rifles and a respected member of the Sadozai clan of the Royal Durrani tribe. It was not to the Queen Empress.<sup>42</sup>

The Khyber Rifles not only guarded the Khyber Pass but they also rendered valuable services to the British in places outside the Khyber. When in

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 8-9.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 9-10.

<sup>41</sup> Trench, 9-11.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

1888, the British Indian Government was conducting a punitive expedition against the tribes of the Black Mountains, Major Aslam Khan and other native officers of the Khyber Rifles offered their services to voluntarily take part in the expedition. This clearly indicates two things about the Khyber Rifles; the confidence that Major Aslam Khan had in his men and the loyalty of the Khyber Rifles towards the British Indian Government. Colonel Warburton recommended to utilize the services of these men and their experience “as mountaineers.” “Their agility and bravery is not equaled by the men of that border (Black Mountains) and it would be a sight for the tribes to see that Afridis of the Khyber Pass are willing to stand up shoulder to shoulder with the soldiers of our regular army against a common foe”, he wrote to the Commissioner, Peshawar Division.<sup>43</sup>

The Government of India, on the recommendation of the Political Agent, Khyber Agency, and the Commissioner, Peshawar Division, sanctioned the employment of 350 men of the Khyber Rifles under Major Aslam Khan in the Hazara expedition.<sup>44</sup> This was the first time that the Khyber Rifles were ever deputed to serve outside the Khyber Agency and they did so well that at the end of the expedition, they were allowed to retain the Sniders (rifles) issued to them during the expedition as a token of their services during the expedition.<sup>45</sup> On their death or leaving the levy, the arms, however, were to be retained by the Corps (The Khyber Rifles).<sup>46</sup>

The reward was well deserved because the terms of their service did not require them to serve outside the Khyber but they volunteered for the Black Mountain Expedition. During the expedition, they took a prominent part in all the major actions and won half-a-dozen gallantry medals. On their return, the Peshawar Municipality gave them a civic reception and dinner.<sup>47</sup>

The Pakhtun officers of the Khyber Corps were notable warriors and many had won medals in wars from China to Egypt. One Subedar Mursil bore on his body the scars of thirty wounds. He was awarded the Indian Order of

<sup>43</sup> Political Agent Khyber to the Commissioner and Superintendent Peshawar Division, No. 297, dated June 30, 1888, File No. 2, Serial No. 29, Bundle No. 2, Foreign Frontier Record, Directorate of Archives and Libraries Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (NWFP), Peshawar.

<sup>44</sup> From Colonel A. C. Toker, Deputy Secretary to the Government of India, Military Department, to Quarter Master General in India, No. 88 H, dated September 22, 1888, File No. 2, Serial No. 29, Bundle No. 2, Foreign Frontier Record, Directorate of Archives and Libraries Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (NWFP), Peshawar.

<sup>45</sup> They were the first among the Khyber Rifles to get the Snider rifles. The rest of the Khyber Rifles got them two years later in 1890.

<sup>46</sup> Under-Secretary to the Government of India to the Secretary to the Government of the Punjab, No. 2739, dated December 18, 1888, File No. 2, Serial No. 29, Bundle No. 2, Foreign Frontier Record, Directorate of Archives and Libraries Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (NWFP), Peshawar.

<sup>47</sup> Trench, 10.

Merit for his bravery and services. When in 1897, the British had to conduct an undignified and hasty withdrawal, the new Commandant Captain Barton was ordered to forsake his men at Landi Kotal and seek safety in Jamrud. He reluctantly obeyed the orders. While most of the Khyber Rifles posts were overrun and burnt, the garrison at Landi Kotal under Subedar Mursil, who had one son with him and two with the enemy, put up an epic defence, killing 118 of their kith and kin. Mursil Khan died a hero's death in the fight.<sup>48</sup>

The Khyber Rifles were deployed in numerous small blockhouses from which they could watch and protect caravan traffic through the Pass. In one of these blockhouses, the entire garrison perished on one freezing night when they were asphyxiated by the fumes of their charcoal store. In another incidence, when one of these blockhouses at Michini Kandao was attacked by a horde of Afghans in 1908, the garrison inside was besieged and the Afghans used gunpowder against them. The Khyber Rifles men in the blockhouse could not see them in the darkness of the night and, therefore, they were unable to aim at them and shoot at them. They found a very interesting way out of this situation. They took off their shirts, soaked them in oil, lit them and threw them at the enemy under the walls. In the flare, they shot down twenty Afghans.<sup>49</sup>

Another event that took place in 1908 is yet another example of the bravery and loyalty of the Khyber Rifles. Just before the Bazar Valley Expedition against the Zakha Khel Afridis, all the Zakha Khels in the Khyber Rifles were paraded by the Political Agent and they were told that they would not be forced to fight against their own people. They were offered six months leave and when they would come back, no questions would be asked. None of them, however, took advantage of this generous offer and preferred to fight in the line of their duty.<sup>50</sup>

In the Political Report of the Bazar Valley Expedition sent by the Political Agent, Khyber, Roos Keppel, to the Chief Commissioner, NWFP, he praised the bravery and conduct of the Khyber Rifles during the expedition. The Corps which was mainly composed of Afridis, including the Zakha Khels, had to take part in an expedition against a people to whom they were bound not only by race and religion but by the closest ties of blood. In many cases, brother fought against brother and son against father. At the start of the campaign, there were serious doubts in the minds of the British authorities about the loyalty of the Khyber Rifles but they fought with great zeal and

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 10-11.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

determination. Not a single man deserted the Corps and not even a single rifle was lost.<sup>51</sup>

In 1912, the Khyber Rifles were the proud guardian of the Khyber Pass from Jamrud to Landi Kotal but compared to the *jezailchies* of 1881, it was by then a much organized force and the strength of the Corps had also increased from 550 to 1700 strong under six British officers.<sup>52</sup>

During the First World War, a number of the men from the Khyber Rifles were sent to the French and Mesopotamian front. This was the second occasion that they were assigned duties outside the Khyber. This time, however, they greatly disappointed the British as most of them deserted. But some of them fought with great valour and bravery. One of them, Mir Dast Afridi<sup>53</sup> received the Victoria Cross, the highest British medal for bravery, for his acts of gallantry on the French front.<sup>54</sup>

During the Third Anglo-Afghan War, the main Afghan attack was directed through the Khyber Pass. During this war, the role of the Khyber Rifles was rather disappointing. Their loyalty had been shaken by the calls of the Mullahs for a Holy War against the British, the revolutionary propaganda from India, and also by the rumour that the Government intended to destroy the flower of the Afridi nation by putting the Khyber Rifles into the forefront of the battle and decimating them with artillery. When a number of desertions were reported, the regular army took over all the Khyber Pass and the Khyber Rifles were offered the choice of discharge or serving on. Those who opted for discharge numbered 1,180. The British favoured the discharge than their desertion with rifles. Of those who opted to stay on, 146 were transferred to a Military Police Battalion and 200 were formed into the Khyber Levy Corps, un-uniformed and armed with their own rifles. For a quarter of a century thereafter, there was no Khyber Rifles.<sup>55</sup> The Corps was disarmed and disbanded because the men in the Khyber Rifles were considered unreliable

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<sup>51</sup> "Political Report of the Bazar Valley Expedition 1908," by Lt. Colonel Roos Keppel, Chief Political Officer, Bazar Valley Field Force, dated March 3, 1908, Office of the Political Agent Khyber, File No. 1 C/ VI, S. No. 279, Bundle No. 43, Directorate of Archives and Libraries, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (NWFP), Peshawar, 51.

<sup>52</sup> H. C. Wylly, *The Borderland: The Country of the Pathans* (Karachi: Indus Publications, 1998), 274-75.

<sup>53</sup> "List of Victoria Cross Recipients by Name", *Art History Club* (Online), February 17, 2006, [http://www.arthistoryclub.com/art\\_history/List\\_of\\_Victoria\\_Cross\\_recipients\\_by\\_Name\\_-\\_M](http://www.arthistoryclub.com/art_history/List_of_Victoria_Cross_recipients_by_Name_-_M)

<sup>54</sup> Macmunn, 37.

<sup>55</sup> Trench, 31.

and even covertly hostile. Some of the Khyber Rifles men had actually fired on the British forces during the battle for Bagh and Dakka.<sup>56</sup>

The disbanding of the Khyber Rifles caused the system of local militia policing in the Khyber Pass to collapse and the area was soon swarming with aggressive groups of anti-British armed tribesmen.<sup>57</sup>

The oldest of all the irregular Frontier Corps, the Khyber Rifles was revived and reformed in 1944-45. It was mostly manned by the volunteers of the Afridi Battalion that had been raised for overseas service in 1942 during the Second World War. The newly revived Khyber Rifles was put under the command of Mohammad Sharif Khan. This time, it was more active and mobile and less *qillaband* (garrisoned in forts) than the old Khyber Rifles.<sup>58</sup>

The ups and downs in the history of the Khyber Rifles, however, cannot eclipse the bravery of the men associated with this Corps. As stated earlier, one *Subedar* Mursil Khan was awarded the Indian Order of Merit in 1897 for his extraordinary bravery. In 1902, *Havildar* Tor Khan of Khyber Rifles was awarded Third Class Order of the Merit<sup>59</sup> in recognition of his conspicuous gallantry in Kurram on September 1, 1897 when he, with a body of 18 men, successfully defended a British outpost against a body of tribesmen estimated at about 800 men.<sup>60</sup> In 1909, another Third Class Order of Merit and a sanad to that effect was conferred upon *Havildar* Yar Beg Zakha Khel of the Khyber Rifles<sup>61</sup> probably for some act of bravery during the Bazar Valley Campaign of 1908.

In August 1947, after the partition of India and coming into existence of Pakistan, the Khyber Rifles and the other Frontier Corps regiments were transferred to the charge of Pakistan. In the post independence era, the

<sup>56</sup> Edgar O'Ballance, *Afghan Wars 1842-1992: What Britain Gave up and Soviet Union Lost* (UK: Brassey's, 1993), 63.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Trench, 264.

<sup>59</sup> The Order of Merit (Civil Division) consisted of three classes and was conferred on Indians, whether servants of Government or not, as a reward for personal bravery shown in aid or support of Public authority or safety. The Insignia were, for the First Class gold; for the Second Class silver with a gold wreath; and for the Third silver only; to be worn on the left breast, pendent from a dark-red ribbon with blue edges. Admission to the Third Class was obtained by any conspicuous act of individual bravery/gallantry but only Third Class members qualify for the Second Class and Second Class for the First.

<sup>60</sup> Secretary to the Government of India to Political Agent Khyber, No. 547, dated June 13, 1902, Office of the Political Agent Khyber, File No. 7 H/ VII, Serial No. 50, Bundle No. 8, Directorate of Archives and Libraries, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Peshawar.

<sup>61</sup> Political Agent Khyber to the Inspecting Officer Frontier Corps, NWFP, No. 225, dated March 20, 1909, Office of the Political Agent Khyber, File No. 7 H/ VII, Serial No. 50, Bundle No. 8, Directorate of Archives and Libraries, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Peshawar.



Khyber Rifles lived up to its reputation and showed its worth in all the three major Indo-Pak wars. In 1948, four Platoons were sent to Kashmir. Similarly, four companies of the Khyber Rifles participated in the 1965 War in which *Subedar* Yaqub earned *Sitara-i-Jurrah* and troops were awarded two *Imtiaz-i-Sanads* (distinction certificates). In the 1971 War, Khyber Rifles fought on both the eastern and western fronts.<sup>62</sup> The following awards were decorated to the force:

*Sitara-i-Jurrah* 1, IOM (Indian Order of Merit) 6, *Imtiaz-i-Sanads* 2, Mentioned in Despatches 2, Gallantry Certificates 2, *Mujahid-i-Haidri* 1, Certificates of *Bahaduri* 1.

In 2007, the strength of the Khyber Rifles was 3,883 with 27 Officers, including one Colonel rank Officer, two Lieutenant Colonels, nine Majors, and fifteen captains. In addition to its traditional policing duties in the tribal areas of the Khyber region, the Khyber Rifles is currently involved in tracking down Afghan fugitives and terrorists.<sup>63</sup>

Due to its legendary character, the Khyber Rifles achieved international fame and recognition. A British writer Talbot Mundy wrote a novel by the title *King of the Khyber Rifles: A Romance of Adventure* in 1916, which later on was made into a Hollywood movie under the same title in 1953. It is one of the most prestigious of all the nineteen units of the Frontier Corps and its role in the maintenance of law and order in the tribal areas and the defence of the Pakistani borders is more dominant than all the other constituent units of the Corps.

### **The *Maliki* and *Khassadari* System**

The *Maliki* system was introduced by the British to encourage pro-Government and pro-administration tribal elders to exercise strong hold and influence over their tribes. These *maliks* worked as intermediaries between the administration and their tribes or "*Qaumi*". The introduction of this system was not a matter of choice but necessity for the British because they knew that they could not control the independent and fierce tribals by force alone. The system was introduced to send a message to the tribes that anyone loyal and accommodating would have a special status and that cooperation with the government would entail regular benefits, recognition from the government and influence in the tribe. *Maliki* is hereditary and devolves on the son and his son, and so on and so forth.<sup>64</sup> If a *malik's* son (*malikzada*) is regarded as unfit

<sup>62</sup> Teepe, 81-82.

<sup>63</sup> "Frontier Corps", *Khyber.org* (Online), May 2, 2007,

<http://www.khyber.org/pashtohistory/frontiercorps/frontiercorps.shtml>

<sup>64</sup> Teepe, 74-75.

for the position, he will then be succeeded by his brother's son. In this way, the official *maliki* remains in the hands of the same lineage.<sup>65</sup>

In the 1920s, the British rulers intended to open strategic roads in different agencies. To guarantee the protection of the roads, the British agreed to give allowances to the tribes in the form of "*Khassadaris*". Accordingly, each tribe or sub-tribe through whose territory the road was to pass were given a certain number of *Khassadars*, an irregular tribal force, who were to be paid out of the allowances given to the tribe for the security and opening of the road<sup>66</sup>. Likewise, the *Khassadar* force was raised in the Khyber as well in the year 1920.<sup>67</sup>

The Frontier Crimes Regulations were promulgated in 1872, the same year that an Afridi assassinated the then Viceroy of India, Lord Mayo. The FCR is a separate law code for the Frontier, based at least in part on local customs, providing for trial by official *jirgas*.<sup>68</sup>

"It is true that the tribal territories were never a part of British India as such. Nevertheless the Crown in the United Kingdom had acquired jurisdiction therein by grants, usages, sufferance and other lawful means. The Foreign Jurisdiction Act passed by the British Parliament in 1890 gave the Crown jurisdiction over "territories outside the dominions of the Crown", within a foreign country "in the same and as ample a manner as if Her Majesty had acquired that jurisdiction by the cession or conquest of territory." Section 5 (1) of this Act gave power to the Crown by Order in Council. In exercise of the power given by this act an Order in Council was made in 1902, called the Indian (Foreign Jurisdiction) Order in Council 1902, which delegated the power of the British Crown to the Governor General of India in Council to make such rules and orders as may seem expedient or to extend and apply any of the provisions of any enactment in force elsewhere for territories outside British India, including the tribal areas."

"In exercise of the powers delegated to him by this order, the Governor General in Council in his turn applied it to all the Political Agencies of the North-West-Frontier Province certain provisions of law then prevailing in British India on 22 September 1926 by Notification No. 443-F."

"Under the Act of 1935, Section 8 gave powers to the executive authority of the Federation, i.e., the Governor General

<sup>65</sup> David Montgomery Hart, *Guardians of the Khaibar Pass: The Sociological Organization and History of the Afridis of Pakistan* (Lahore: Vanguard Books Ltd., 1985), 77.

<sup>66</sup> Now they are directly paid by the Government through the Political Agent.

<sup>67</sup> *1998 Census Report of Khyber Agency* (Islamabad: Population Census Organization, Government of Pakistan, December 2000), 13.

<sup>68</sup> Hart, 106.

of India, “to exercise all such rights, authority and jurisdiction as are exercised by His Majesty’s treaties, grants, usages and sufferances in or in relation to the tribal areas.” The Indian Foreign Jurisdiction Order 1937 was passed on 18<sup>th</sup> March 1937 which reaffirmed and regularized the position resulting from the enactment of the Government of India Act 1935.”<sup>69</sup>

## Conclusion

The British administration in the Khyber was a perfect example of the policy of carrot and stick. Perks and incentives often worked to gain the support of the leading men and tribes in the Khyber. If the carrot proved insufficient, the stick was always there to supplement the work. However, it should not be overlooked that they also utilized the services and expertise of some of their best officers not just to tame the unruly Khyber tribesmen but to win them over by speaking their language and adopting their dress and manners. From political officers Major P. L. N. Cavagnari (1879) to Colonel Robert Warburton (1897) and political agents from Sir George Olaf Roos-Keppel (1902) to Major G. L. Cole (1945), the British officers made their way through the hearts and minds of the Khyber tribesmen not only by speaking softly to them but by carrying a big stick to use when the need was felt.

The success of their administrative set-up, techniques and implementation of successful methods employed by their predecessors like the Mughals not only enabled them to gain a strong foothold in the Khyber but also facilitated their work elsewhere on the North West Frontier, utilizing the services of the men they recruited in the Frontier Corps and the Khyber Rifles from among the most fierce and brave Khyber tribesmen.

One important fact that we can learn from the British administration in the Khyber is that the hill-abode of the tribesmen is their greatest strength and biggest weakness at the same time. It is hard to gain access to their territory but it is easy to impose an effective blockade on them, compelling them to come to terms and agree to a settlement through negotiations. However, both the use of force and blockades should always be resorted to as the last option available because the British experience shows that it is easy to win over the tribesmen rather than to conquer them.

In short, the success of British policy in the Khyber hills was because of their tact and diplomacy supplemented by effective use of force when necessary. ■

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<sup>69</sup> “Ruling of the Supreme Court of Pakistan,” in Syed Abdul Quddus, *The Pathans* (Lahore: Ferozsons Pvt. Ltd., 1987), 335-339.