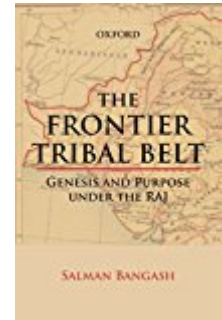


Salman Bangash. *The Frontier Tribal Belt: Genesis and Purpose Under the Raj.*
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Reviewed by Robert Nichols

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Commissioned by Sumit Guha (The University of Texas at Austin)

At first look Salman Bangash has written what appears to be a familiar study of the British-Indian imperial “frontier” in the 1849-1914 period focused specifically on the North West Frontier Province Pukhtun (Pakhtun/Pashtun) “tribal” belt. Over time this territory was organized as today’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan. In a pattern typical in Pakistani studies of the region, the author begins with a chapter on the typography, ethnography, and “geo-strategic significance” of the area. He then writes chapters on the British frontier policy as a colonial problem, on the region in the context of Anglo-Russian diplomacy, on British frontier policy, on colonial tribal administration, and finally on British imperialism and the frontier wars.

Again in a familiar pattern, to tell his story the author draws primarily upon the vast English-language archive of British colonial and postcolonial official documents, personal papers, memoirs, and histories. A handful of Urdu-language and Pashto-language sources are used, as well as more recent American- and British-authored his-

tories. But the author’s perspective is not that of a colonial administrator or a mid-twentieth-century postcolonial Western writer simply narrating stories and replicating analyses and attitudes embedded within imperial reports and writing. Professor Bangash has drawn upon more recent critical studies of imperial literature from both Western academic writing and from Pakistani authors. He has recognized the rhetoric and metaphors that produced colonial racial hierarchies and notions of essential difference.

Writers of colonial documents “had their own particular interests in mind.” Pukhtuns were either “courageous and admirable, or perfidious scoundrels,” as they “were popularized, stereotyped, and even mythologized in literature, mostly of colonial inspiration.” Indigenous character “was a favorite theme of disparagement” (p. 19). Bangash quotes an 1855 report by Richard Temple, secretary to the chief commissioner of the Punjab, on the Frontier communities. Words used by Temple included “superstitious,” “priest ridden,” “very avaricious,” “thievish,” “predatory,”

and “bloodthirsty” (p. 19). Bangash quotes the anthropologist Charles Lindholm’s reflection that such attitudes varied with political conditions and that “these pictures are drawn by distinct individuals, but they also obviously are a reflection of particular historical colonial situations. The sociology of knowledge position is therefore verified in the Pathan case” (p. 21).

In this volume, as Professor Bangash retells a well-studied story of the British-Indian “frontier,” he strives to read past an established history of colonial, imperial, and Western agency and restore a more local, Pukhtun, and provincial historical perspective. The story is covered from the 1849 British occupation of the Peshawar valley and border “settled” districts, through decades of creating “tribal agencies” as a buffer between British India and the kingdom of Afghanistan. The study ends at the beginning of World War I, when global political changes initiated new dynamics, even at the fringe of a world empire. Bangash sees the “tribal belt” as a construction serving a global British imperial effort to protect colonial frontiers. As Afghanistan was used as a buffer state to separate the expanding Russian and British Asian imperial projects, so the tribal agencies were formulated to assert a sphere of influence over Afghan border populations. As a “buffer to a buffer,” the agencies would further insulate British India from both Russian and Afghan interference.

As expected for a region of current importance in international affairs, two other important recent studies also examine the “Anglo-Afghan” and “Afghan-Pakistan” borderlands and help situate this complex regional history within a wider, global imperial and postcolonial context of state-building and state competition. Martin Bayly’s *Taming the Imperial Imagination: Colonial Knowledge, International Relations, and the Anglo-Afghan Encounter, 1936-1965* (2016) and Elisabeth Leake’s *The Defiant Border: The Afghan-Pakistan Borderlands in the Era of Decolonization,*

1936-1965 (2016) have been introduced and reviewed elsewhere.[1] The production of knowledge about this region as exemplified by these three texts illustrates, in some ways to the disadvantage of Professor Bangash, continued realities of access to and use of academic and nonacademic sources available for studies of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Afghan, Pakistani, or regional histories. (In 2010 the North West Frontier Province was renamed Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province).

With a PhD from the Area Study Centre, University of Peshawar, Professor Bangash teaches in the Peshawar University History Department. Though the Bangash are a well-known border community, regional-language and national-language resources (both primary and secondary literature) have not been drawn upon to any large extent in *The Frontier Tribal Belt*. Shelves of English-language, colonial primary source documents (including in the United Kingdom, but also in the provincial archives in Peshawar) as well as hundreds of titles of imperial-era official and narrative reports, books, and other publications have long attracted numerous scholars to research the themes and region under study. Leake and Bayly, and many others, have drawn extensively upon these English-language sources. Such work, including that of Bangash, often follows the sources in concentrating on strategic, international, and state-related issues and policy making.

But Pakistani scholars, including Salman Bangash, writing as others do in English for a national and international readership, face serious challenges in funding research, spending time in British and international archives and libraries, keeping up with current international publications, and in teaching and writing in a context that enables productive scholarly interaction and methodological rigor. While each of *The Frontier Tribal Belt*’s chapters is strongly supported with numerous and lesser-known citations, the volume reveals problems that include missed appropriate

references, an overuse of quotations from narrative sources, and technical apparatus issues such as typos, footnoting errors, and inexact quotations.

Throughout his history Salman Bangash successfully details how global British imperial concerns with Russia and more regional concerns with Afghanistan generated ongoing policy debates about defending British India. This led to the construction of frontier tribal agencies as zones of nominal independence, but actual authoritarian oversight. Methods of control included British political agents, a class of subsidized intermediary “tribal” collaborators, laws such as the Frontier Crimes Regulation, and regular applications of military coercion. “The peculiar form of administration devised by the British for the Tribal areas has no parallel elsewhere” (p. 312), argues the author. With this he contributes to ongoing scholarly discussion about imperial frontiers, including current and forthcoming work by Benjamin Hopkins.[2]

The Frontier Tribal Belt follows in a long tradition at the University of Peshawar of examining colonial-era regional history. Lal Baha’s 1978 book *N.W.F.P. Administration under British Rule, 1901-1919* remains a serious, exemplary study. Pukhtun scholars, including Sultan-i-Rome, now also draw upon regional-language sources to write histories drawn from the fullest range of voices and sources possible.[3] In *The Frontier Tribal Belt*, Salman Bangash offers a critical, Peshawar-based perspective on British imperial attitudes and policies, including the imagining and construction of a “tribal” world that then required control to serve the needs of a global empire.

Notes

[1]. Timothy Nunan, “Why Pakhtun lands have been so volatile for two centuries,” *Herald*, September 29, 2016. See <http://herald.dawn.com/news/1153543/why-pakhtun-lands-have-been-so-volatile-for-two-centuries>.

[2]. Benjamin Hopkins, “The Frontier Crimes Regulation and Frontier Governmentality,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 74, no. 2 (2015): 369-389.

[3]. Sultan-i-Rome, *Swat State, 1915-1969: From Genesis to Merger: An Analysis of Political, Administrative, Socio-Political, and Economic Development* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2008).

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