

BENEVOLENCE OR MALEVOLENCE: THE ROLE OF IMPERIAL RAILWAYS TO MANIPULATE MOHMAND TRIBE DURING BRITISH RAJ

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Abstract: *The paper attempts to explore the role and significance of railways as a tool of manipulation to strengthen the British Raj's hold on the Mohmand tribe dwelling on the North-West Frontier of British India in the backdrop of the nineteenth-century imperialistic power struggle between Russia and Britain. The paper argues that the British government, in a semblance of universal social and economic reform, constructed the railways on the Mohmand land for a strategic end to augment its military hold on the tribe. Interestingly, during the whole process of track laying through their land, the Mohmand tribesmen had no decision-making. This paper follows historical approach drawn on primary and secondary sources. These sources are further analysed inductively in a comprehensive scientific way, resting on both monologic and dialogic approaches. Furthermore, the subject is dealt through Empiric-Analytic Reason.*

Keywords: *Railway, Mohmand, Durand Line, Amir of Afghanistan.*

Introduction

The Mohmands belonged to the Ghwariah Khel section. They descended from Sarbani, the elder son of Qais, the putative ancestor of the Pashtuns.ⁱ Residing on the eastern flank of the Durand line, they were divided into four chief clans; Tarakzai, Halimzai, Baezai, Khwaezai.ⁱⁱ The head of each clan was the Khan. He was a hereditary chief hailing from the prestigious families who had always produced leaders since ancient times. The Mohmands had aristocratic tribal constitution. Unlike the tribes of Sufaid Koh and Tirah, the Mohmand Khan enjoyed a lot of influence and power. The Khan had the power to repress disturbances and punish criminals in the tribe. The tribe followed the orders of the Khan in view of general tribal interest or at a time of widespread popular excitement. The Khan was assisted by the clan elders in execution of his duties. Before the arrival of the British, the Khan was fiscally very strong and received income from Jagirs or feudal land grants, and imposed taxes on the river route and on the Khyber road. Income from Jagirs was mainly paid in cash and was collected by the khan's agents known as "Faujdar."ⁱⁱⁱ In villages where vast jagirs were held or existed, the faujdar imposed fines for offences committed by a member of the tribe.

The Tarakzai, jointly with the Halimzai, the Baezai and the Khwaezai each occupied in tribal politics an independent and distinct position. Broad internal feuds were insignificant. However, in every village private blood feuds were common. Those violent quarrels continued till the neighbours stepped in to make a settlement or they took up arms and burnt the villages of the weaker party. The "vaish" system or the periodical re-distribution of tribal lands was not followed throughout the Mohmand tribe.^{iv} The Mohmand hills did not hold any benefit for the population because they were extremely barren and sporadically covered only with dull grass, brushwood, and mean palm. People however supplemented their needs by doing trade and by imposing tax on timber across the border. Some tribesmen earned their living by herding and carrying mules, donkeys and camels. The soil was mostly barren due to

scarcity of water.^v The Mohmand tribe was predominantly Sunni Muslims. They had deep reverence for “*Ziarats*” (shrines) and “*Mullahs*.” Other than performing religious duties, the mullahs served as the protectors of children and women committed to their charge. They also acted as the arbitrators and mediators in family or tribal feuds.^{vi}

The paper attempts to explore the role and significance of railways as a tool of manipulation to strengthen the British Raj's hold on the Mohmand tribe dwelling on the North-West Frontier of British India in the backdrop of the nineteenth-century imperialistic power struggle between Russia and Britain. This paper follows historical approach drawn on primary and secondary sources. These sources are further analysed inductively in a comprehensive scientific way, resting on both monologic and dialogic approaches. Furthermore, the subject is dealt through Empiric-Analytic Reason.

British Government Relations with the Mohmand Tribe

The British Indian Government had dealings with Mohmand principal clans of Tarakzai, Burhan Khel, Isa Khel of Pandiali and the Halimazai of Gandab and Kamali.^{vii} The two Mohmand tribes, Halimzai and Tarakzai, showed a very hostile attitude towards the British Indian government by making inroads into Peshawar to recover their lost fiefs. Punitive expeditions in 1851, 1852 and 1854 were started against them by the British Indian Government in order to control them.^{viii}

The 1857 uprisings in India provided the Mohmand tribe with an opportunity to recover their lost territories. The Commissioner of Peshawar, Colonel Herbert Edwards, had to promise that the Mohmand tribe lost territories would be restored to them as the British Indian Government had no troops to move against them.^{ix} The Mohmands were charged with no less than 125 outrages on the Peshawar district between 1855 and 1860.^x On January 2, 1864, a decisive battle was fought near Shabkadar. British force defeated the Mohmand with a heavy loss.^{xi}

As a punishment for killing Major MacDonald who was the commandant of the Fort Michni in 1873, the British Government in India imposed a fine of Rs 10,000. They paid it without any resistanc.^{xii} In 1879 (Second Anglo-Afghan War) Mohmand's next skirmish with British Indian Government took place when the latter intended to carry out a survey of the Shanilo route from Peshawar to Dakka by passing the main Khyber route.^{xiii}

The Mohmand country was divided between the British India and Afghan Government by the Durand Agreement of 1893. According to the agreement, the boundary drawn on the map ran through the center of the Mohmand Hills. However, this boundary had never been demarcated and later on various occasions it was disputed.^{xiv} The eastern Mohmand clans comprising the Tarakzai, Halimzai of Gandab and Kamali, BurhanKhel and Isa Khel, and the affiliated clans of Dawezai and Utmanzai, under the Durand Agreement, fell on the British side of the border. These Mohmands were afterward called the “Assured clans” which meant that they were given assurances by the British Government that they would be treated in the same manner as they were treated by the Amir of Afghanistan in the past.^{xv} In 1896, the *jirgas* of those clans were received by Lieutenant Governor of the Punjab and granted an allowance of Rs. 8,480 to Halimzai of Gandab, of RS 2,800 to Halimzai of Kamali, of Rs 1200 to Dawezai, of Rs. 720 to Utmanzai, of Rs 3,600 to Trakzai while the allowances of Isa Khel and Burhan Khel were raised to Rs. 1,325 on the condition that they would remain faithful to the British Indian Government.^{xvi}

However, they were among the first people to declare Jihad in 1897 against the British power. In this spirit, they attacked Shabkadar. Three Brigades consisting of Punjab (20th), Gurkhas (2nd and 9th), Dogras (37th), Bengal (13th), Mombay (28th), Patiala and Nabha units were involved in full scale operations against the Mohmand.^{xvii} The three Brigades of the Mohmand field Force reached up to the inaccessible Baezai Jarobi areas and causing great damage to villages, grain stores and water tank. Churchill, who marched along the force road wrote “For beneath was a valley upon which perhaps no white man had looked since alexander crossed the mountains on his march to India.” Two brigades of

the Malakand field force under Sir Bindon Blood invaded the Mohmand country from Bajaur and from Shabkadar. Two other forces under the command of Sir Edmond Ellis also invaded the areas. The Mohmands did not demonstrate any serious resistance in 1906. They did not oppose the extension of the railway which was commenced from Peshawar to the Afghan frontier through Shilman.^{xviii}

Factors Leading to the Establishment of Relations between British Government and the Mohmand Tribe

The relations of the Mohmand tribe with the British Indian Government never looked satisfactory. They were a source of constant irritation and annoyance to the British Indian Government because of many reasons. Firstly, Mohmands were forced by the circumstances to fulfill their necessities of life by raiding the rich plains around Peshawar as their almost waterless hills were barren. Secondly, because they were situated on the northern flank of Khyber, their geographical position strengthened their capacity to plunder the caravans passing through their areas between India and Afghanistan. Thirdly, they owed allegiance to the Amir of Kabul from whom their Chiefs received allowances.^{xix} After the annexation of Punjab by the British in 1849 it was mainly through the Saddat Khan of Lalpura that the Amir of Kabul endeavored to harass the British Indian border.^{xx}

In 1880 Abdur Rahman Khan became the new Amir of Afghanistan. After consolidation of his hold on Afghanistan he began to interfere with the frontier tribes of Khyber, Kurram, Bajaur, Dir and Chitral.^{xxi} This was not tolerable to the British Government in view of the fact that if the Amir of Afghanistan took possession of any tribal area that would result in bringing the Afghan frontier in direct proximity with the British government without the tribal buffer in the midst. In October 1893, a mission under Sir H. Mortimer Durand, the then foreign secretary to the government of India was sent to Kabul. He was able to fix the legitimate boundary between British India and Afghanistan known as the Durand line. Nevertheless, the behavior of the Amir Abdur Rahman Khan emerged distressing, especially over the boundary demarcation of the Mohmand tribe.^{xxii} Perturbingly for the Mohmand tribesmen the newly drawn boundary traversed their tribal region, surrendering half of the Mohmand tribe on the British side and the other half on the Afghan side of the Durand line. This was not acceptable to Mohmands and the Amir of Afghanistan who earnestly wished the Mohmand tribe to be on the Afghan side of the Durand line.^{xxiii}

Furthermore, the Durand line delineated on the conventional map did not comprehensively specify the Anglo-Afghan boundary. However, the British government disapproved this explanation and therefore during the whole of the year 1896 the controversy clamored on, particularly as the Amir Abdur Rahman Khan was outwardly inducing Ghulam Haider Khan, his Sipah Salar (Commander in Chief) to provoke the Mohammad to rebell. A more significant apprehension for the British government concerning the Amir of Afghanistan was about the two titles he had adopted for himself and the two books he had written. He assumed for himself the title of 'King of Islam' in 1889 and the 'Light of the Religion and of the Faith' in 1896. Moreover, the books he wrote were entitled 'Rectification of the Faith' and 'Inducement for a Holy War'. About sixty copies of latter book were reported to be sent to a local Mullah by the Hakim of Kunar for dispensation among the Mohmand tribesmen just before 1897 tribal uprising on the British India's Northwest frontier.^{xxiv}

The British government, ever since the 1857 Indian mutiny remained cautious of Indian Muslims. The British held them mainly responsible for giving rise to the mutiny. These concerns were further aggravated when Lord Mayo, the Indian Viceroy was assassinated in 1872 by a Muslim. The emergence of Pan-Islamic sentiments caused by the danger propounded by European supremacy to the Muslim politics was of great anxiety to the British government in India. It was proclaimed in Britain by 1882 that the Ottoman Caliphate was on the surface of Pan-Islamic mission.^{xxv}

This led to serious anger within the Turkish Empire. At the outbreak of the 1897 tribal uprising on the British India's Northwest frontier, one of the major concerns for the British government was the

probable involvement of Pan-Islamic sentiment among the frontier tribes. In May 1897, Colonel Robert Warburton, Political Agent Khyber, stated "Reports were circulated in Peshawar that an agent from Constantinople had reached Cabbul, had interviewed the Amir who had sent for the noted Mullahs in this country, had introduced them to his agent, and after telling them to go to their homes and preach a religious war... to their people and secure one out of every eight males as reservist for his army, had permitted them to leave."^{xxvi}

Fourthly, the priest-ridden Mohmand tribe was easily influenced by the fanatical utterance of their mullahs. The British became aware early in the year 1897 that Hadda Mulla was provoking the Mohmand tribesmen by urging them not to co-operate with the British government in India. He had even openly declared that the members of the Mohmand Jirga who attended the British Durbar held at Shabkadar in November 1896 would not receive burial according to Islamic injunctions. His real name was Najm-ud-Din but derived the title Hadda from Adda or Hadda, a village in the Jalalabad district of Afghanistan where he was born in 1817. However, he was expelled in 1883 from Afghanistan by the order of Amir of Afghanistan. He started residing in Jarobi Glen, a district of the Baezai Mohmand country. He possessed immense influence over the Mohmand tribesmen. Moreover, he acquired great power over the tribes of Bajaur and the Khan of Nawagi. Even though he was not successful to lead a contingent of his follower against the advance of Chitral Relief Force at the Malakand Pass, it was reported that he had a close contact with Ghulam Haider, the Afghan Commander-in-Chief from whom he received financial assistance and arms. He made an attempt in the early 1897 to begin anti British movement in Bajaur with the help of Mian Guls of Swat.^{xxvii}

A lot of concern to the British Indian Government was caused in 1897 by a serious uprising against the British in the entire tribal belt. Important causes underlying the 1897 general uprising were according to Davies, the pursuance of active forward policy by the British Indian Government in the 1890's and the influence of fanaticism.^{xxviii} Moreover, the Pashtun resentment against the Greco-Turkish war, discontent among the tribes due to the demarcation of Durand line, the taking over of the control of Samana Range, the Kurram Valley, Daur and Wana by the British government, and the passage of British troops through the various tribal tracks and the government imposition of tax on Kohat salt were the factors responsible for Pushtun uprising of 1897.^{xxix} The instigation of some formidable Mullahs like Hadda Mullah in Mohmand area, the Mastana Mullah in Swat and Mullah Said Akbar Aka Khel in Khyber and the exaggerated expectation of moral and material support from the Amir of Afghanistan are added by Javed Iqbal, to be the factors responsible for the outbreak of uprising of 1897.^{xxx} Olaf Caroe was of the view that British Indian Government penetration into the tribal territory, the demarcation of five Political Agencies and the passage of British troops through their territory in all directions, and the garrisoning of the strategically and economically important tracks alarmed the tribesmen that the British Government was out to destroy their long cherished independence which ultimately set the whole frontier in blaze in 1897-98.^{xxxi} The uprising started in Tochi, Mohmand and Malakand.

After the tribal uprising of 1897 Lord Frederick Sleigh Roberts (1832-1914) stressed upon the British government the need to improve and extent railway communications on its North-West Frontier in order to enable the British army to advance forward whenever it might be necessary. He was in favour of establishing closer and friendly relations with the tribes through whose territories the railways would have to run.^{xxxi} In response, the British Authorities began to plan a railway line to be laid in Mohmand territory with the intension that it would be extended to Kabul and beyond. Moreover, the British government was greatly enticed by the strategic location of Mohmand tribal area because an important trade route went through the Mohmand country to Afghanistan from Shabkaddar to Kama through Karapa. This route was considered to be a rich source of income to the Mohmands.^{xxxiii} A considerable amount of Charas and Opium had been smuggled from Afghanistan into British Indian territory via Mohmand country to evade the duty payable in India on Charas and Opium.^{xxxiv}

The Role of Imperial Railways To Manipulate Mohmand Tribe During British Raj

This section attempts to explore the significance of railways as a device and tool to strengthen British Indian Government hold on its North-West Frontier in the back drop of nineteenth century power struggle between Russia and Britain. W.P. Andrew, Chairman, Sindh, Punjab, and Delhi Railway Company, in 1857 ventured on strategic grounds to advocate the line to Bolan and also to the Khyber in the following words: "The grand object was to connect England with the North-West frontier of India by steam transit through the Euphrates and Indus Valleys. The latter would render moveable to either the Khyber or the Bolan, the two gates of India, the flower of the British army, cantoned in the Punjab, and the Euphrates and India lines being connected by means of steamers, we should be enabled to threaten the flank and rear of any force advancing through Persia towards India, so that the invasion of India by this scheme would be rendered practically impossible."^{xxxv}

Russia had constructed Trans-Caspian Railways in 1879. These Railways had a great military and strategic importance because they were considered to be the quickest mobilizing agents in the time of any threat to Czari's Kingdom in Central Asia.^{xxxvi} Russia took a decision to extend the Trans-Caspian railway eastwards from Kizil-Arvat on account of a clash between Russian and Afghan troops at Penjdeh in 1885, which brought Britain and Russia to the verge of war in Central Asia.^{xxxvii} The Trans-Caspian line became an issue of concern for the British Indian Government not only because it had an obvious capacity for transporting troops and artillery but also because it was being extended eastwards at an alarming speed by the Russian Engineers.^{xxxviii} The second Anglo-Afghan War was another important factor to be seriously considered by the British Indian Government to control the expansion of Railway lines.^{xxxix} Determined efforts were made by British during and after the Second Anglo-Afghan war (1878-80) to improve lines of logistics in the North West frontier.

The British Indian Government regarded it necessary to gain control over the hostile tribesmen. To construct roads and railways for the quick movement of troops into tribal territory was one way of doing this. The British wanted to control all the entrances to the cities of Kabul, Ghazni and Kandahar because of the fear that the Russian might move towards Afghanistan. These Afghan cities had great strategic importance as they guarded approaches to the main passes leading from Central Asia to India. British efforts were concentrated on constructing railways in two directions to the north towards Khyber and Kurram, and to the south towards the Bolan Pass.^{xl}

One of the main principles of Lord Curzon's Frontier policy was the development of communications in order to concentrate troops rapidly at any threatened point to reinforce tribal *militia*, and to inspire the militia men with "greater confidence in themselves" and to give them security in their loyalty to the British Indian Government. He pointed out to Hamilton that with the construction of railways, the half Frontier question of forts, cantonments and moveable columns would be solved. Another benefit of railways according to Curzon was that it would also give an impetus to trade which in its turn would bring prosperity to the frontier tracts. They would also serve Curzon added, as an effective tool of fostering peace and good understanding between the local people and the British Indian Government. Curzon considered the feasibility of constructing a railway through the Khyber Pass, within two months of his taking over as Viceroy of India, with the object of linking Peshawar with Jalalabad and later with Kabul.^{xli}

The possible routes for a railway from Peshawar to Afghanistan were the Khyber Pass route and the Kabul River Valley route. Sir Guilford Molesworth was the first to give a proposal to build a railway to Afghanistan after the first Anglo-Afghan War.^{xlii} The possibility of running a meter gauged line through Khyber was examined by him. However, his idea did not become practically applicable, because at that time on Indus River, even the bridge at Attock was not yet built. Moreover, several objections were made against the Khyber Pass route as well. It was believed that there would be great engineering difficulties and it would be highly expensive because the terrain was high and rocky; the result might well be that the railway would be a narrow-gauge line.^{xliii} However, in times of emergency,

this would not have adequately served the purpose of moving large bodies of troops. It was not only expensive to build but difficult to maintain. The Government would have been constantly involved in ensuring the safety of the railway line as it would have aroused Afridi opposition.^{xliv}

Furthermore, the British Indian Government feared that a widely diffused apprehension might be produced in other tribes because of the construction of the railway, and the British Indian Government wanted to suppress the independence of the tribes. The Kabul River Valley was the second route which had been surveyed by Captain J.R.L Macdonald in 1890-91.^{xlv} MacDonald report suggested that along the Southern bank of Kabul River it was possible and feasible to construct a broad-gauge line from Peshawar to Dakka. It was opined that no big engineering problems would appear. Curzon was also of the view that the line would be safe from the attacks of the neighboring tribes. Lord Curzon believed that the Kabul River would be the best possible route to establish communication between Afghanistan and British India.^{xlvi}

The British Indian Government appointed a Light Military Railway Commission in July 1901, to report on the best possible route for a railway from Peshawar to Afghanistan. The Commission recommended in its preliminary report of 18 September 1902, the construction of a narrow-gauge railway from Peshawar to Dakka via Warsak. After considering the report of the committee, Curzon decided to postpone the construction of the railway until the improvement of relations with the new Amir of Afghanistan, Habibullah.

Louis Dane made a mission to Kabul and an opportunity was created to raise the Kabul railway issue with the Amir of Kabul. Dane persuaded the Amir to agree to the railway project along the Kabul River. But the Amir reiterated that the British Indian government had to stay off the demarcated line. On the 9th June 1905, Broderick was informed by Curzon that a railway would be built up at the Shilman-Ghakhe pass until the Amir's attitude became favorable, but its extension towards Dakka would have to be awaited. The estimate of the project was Rs. 15,100,000.^{xlvii}

Lord Minto took over from Curzon as a new viceroy of India in November 1905. The Viceroy's personal opinion regarding the Kabul River railway was that the project had better be abandoned because it would be intensely unpopular with the Frontier tribes as well as with Amir. The Viceroy further thought that as the general Anglo-Russian political relations were showing signs of improvement there was no need to undertake expensive railway projects. Minto consulted the Chief Commissioner of Peshawar, Dean, to consider the issue of the Kabul River Railway Project. Dean thought that it was a political mistake to abandon the project because it gave the tribal people a chance to think that the government is weak. Apart from that the employed people in the construction and protection of the Line could lose confidence in the Government. Minto agreed to Dean's suggestions and began to feel the projected railway to the Afghan border as a great military necessity.^{xlviii}

However, Mohmand Territory posed a difficult situation, for, in order to safeguard the railway-line the British government could not make sufficient arrangement single handedly except at immense expenditure. Hence the strategy was espoused to procure the support of Tarakzai Mohmand maliks through whose country the railways tracks passed. On December 18, 1905 the British Government entered into agreement with Malik of Tarakzai Mohmand tribe to take responsibility for the protection of Kabul River railway from all attacks. They promised in return an increase of Rs.5000 per annum in their allowances.^{xlix} In 1908 the Mohmand troubles broke out before a decision could be taken by the Government of India on the issue.¹

Indian office reviewed the Kabul River Railway Project towards the end of 1908. The Financial Secretary, L.A Brahams, pointed out the great increase in the estimated cost of the project since its sanctioning in November 1905. The revised expenditure was estimated at Rs 5,042,874 in November 1905 and in November 1908 at Rs 10,875,157, which was more than the original estimate.^{li} He said that the project was expensive and asked the government to reconsider it. And when an alliance between

Russia and British was made at St. Petersburg convention on 31 August 1907, the so-called threats to India from the Russian side were overcome; as a result, the Kabul River Railway Project was dismissed before it reached Durand Line. The used materials were removed and were taken elsewhere.^{lii}

Conclusion

From a historical perspective, railways held lot of significance as they shaped important dynamics of British Empire. They not only determined the physical grasp and competence of the British government, but also its political and economic growth and wealth. They acted as tools for their inner safety, outer or foreign defense and the achievement of their foreign policy goals. They played central role in the making of their empire, and then in its extension and development. Their part in times of peace was definite, but in time of war: indispensable.

The major motive behind the British decision to construct railways in Mohmand tribal area was its privileged location. It lied at the fringe of Anglo-Afghan border and was hardly a few miles away from Afghanistan. In addition, Mohmand region boasted the main trade route through which the British anticipated to expand its sway. Furthermore, the fear of Russian aggression in Central Asia since the 1860s; the control of the territory leading to the Afghanistan way ahead of Russian transgression since Afghanistan held great strategic importance in terms of access to the main passes from and to Central Asia and India and to consolidate their position by opening out the territory and improving connections with the border tribes were the main factors which led the British government to construct the railways on the Mohmand land. In nutshell the British government, in a semblance of universal social and economic reform, constructed the railway for a strategic end to augment its military hold on the Mohmand tribe. Interestingly, during the whole process of track laying through their land, the Mohmand tribesmen had no decision-making. The only option left with the tribe was to agree to whatever the British government wanted them to agree to. It failed to bring any significant social and economic change in the lives of the common Mohmand tribesmen.

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- ⁱⁱⁱ The Manager, North-Western Railway, to the Agent to the Governor General and Chief Commissioner, North West Frontier Province, letter No. w/1181-F, dated the 9th December, 1909, File No. 10, Serial No. 277, Bundle No. 43, DALKP.