

Muslim Saints, Chiefs and Changing Socio-Economic Structures: A Critical Analysis of Fredrik Barth's Swat Pathans

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DOI: <https://10.71145/rjsp.v2i2.157>

Abstract

Frederick Barth's "Swat Pathan" is considered one of the most authentic pieces of research in the anthropology of Pakistan. Regarded as a classic, the book remains a valuable source for those studying Pakhtun societies. Decades have passed, and many significant changes including Swat's merger with Pakistan, increased migration to the Gulf and other parts of the world, the Afghan wars, rising literacy rates, changes in the socio-economic structure, and the Taliban movement in Swat have led to broader socio-economic transformations.

Introduction

Frederik Barth's Swat Pathans has been a classic book for social science readers, particularly those interested in studying anthropology. His work remains a phenomenal guide for anthropological research in the Pakhtun region. This research looks at how the broader socio-economic changes have affected the socio-cultural set-up of Swat. In this book, Barth describes the Political system of the people of Swat in northwestern Pakistan, the sources of political authority, and the form of organization within which the political authority is extended. Swat is a mountainous area where rice, sugarcane, lentils, fruits, and vegetables are mainly grown. Swat joined Pakistan after the partition of the subcontinent. Most of the Swat population are Yousufzai Pathans, whose common ancestor was Yusuf. They came here as conquerors and occupied the land. Sheikh Mali, a holy man, helped the Yousafzai Pathans with the inequitable land division.

Barth has mentioned a hierarchy of different castes, where full members and political patrons are the ones who are land owners; by this classification, two main groups have been identified which are:

- a) Pakhtuns (here the word Pakhtun refers to the Pakhtun chiefs who are land owners and exercise political authority)
- b) Saints (people of holy descent)

Among the land-owning Pakhtuns, endogamous marriages are common, and they discourage giving women to inferior men. However, they sometimes marry women of lower social status. Barth offers a percentage of endogamy, hypergamy, and hypogamy, which is 60%, 23%, and 17 respectively.

The political authority of the chiefs is exercised over and depends upon the non-land-owning people, who are mostly their tenants and have different occupations. They are economically, politically, and socially dependent upon their chiefs, with whom they have other types of contracts. The area is physically divided into Regions, Local areas, Villages, and wards. Every ward has a typical mosque and a religious leader, and every ward has a Yousufzai Pathan chief. The chief has a web of relationships within and outside his ward. Any non-land-owning person not in direct contact with the chief expresses his allegiance to the chief by visiting his men's house. The political authority and position of the chief depended upon the hospitality he extended in the house of men, ownership of land, and reputation for honor. Extended patrilineal families exist till the time when the common ancestor remains alive. The hierarchical division is called "Qaum," its membership is determined by birth.

Pakhtuns and saints hold administrative and judicial powers, and people identify themselves with political unit groups led by Pakhtuns and saints, not with a particular caste group. Caste itself does not define any political unit; everyone is free to choose a political/economic group for himself. Saints can exploit their followers more than a Chief, and their authority covers a much wider area. Barth views the participation of Chiefs in community life (marriages and deaths) as essential political acts.

People are free to form alliances, and they do so with those who share their interests. A partnership's primary role is to help in times of conflict. However, issues of honor are individual's. One cannot be a member of two houses of men simultaneously.

Objectives

- To review Barth's seminal work on Swat Pathans from a native perspective.
- To document the most salient changes in the socio-cultural milieu of Swat, comparing it with Barth's work.

Methodology

This research collects data from first-hand and second-hand sources. Barth's Swat Pathans is used as a sourcebook. Two weeks of fieldwork were conducted in Swat, during which primary data was collected through participant observation.

Analysis and Discussion

Barth's "*Political Leadership among Swat Pathans*" is a significant contribution and gives an insight into the Pakhtun society. Barth has studied the Pakhtun society deeply, with a few exceptions, which we mentioned earlier. His primary focus has been the complex political structure of Swat concerning Authority, where he says that authority is established through Land, which is considered wealth. The land and wealth in Pakhtun society mean ways to resolve conflicts, so we

can sum up by saying that authority derives from conflicts involving aggressive actions like taking revenge, occupying the property of a weaker opponent, etc.

We agree with Barth's statement that he terms land as the ultimate source of livelihood for both chief and tenant. The Chief is concerned about the land because he maintains his social status through the land, and he does not work on the land and knows very little about the land compared to the tenant. On the other hand, the tenants are mostly vulnerable and poor, and their only source of livelihood is the Chief's land; tenants get economic and social benefits from the Chief. The most crucial point that attracted our attention is when Barth (P.57) mentions that.

“The Pathans of Swat declare themselves as strict Sunnis and have recently been exposed to the influence of firm beliefs and interpretation of Wahabi-type shrines. This fundamental version of the Wahabi religion remains in a state of flux. It is generally considered the most sophisticated and critical of local traditional procedures, which they regard as abusing religion. However, persons of lower social status, particularly women, have great faith in this set of beliefs,”

If we look at the present situation of Swat, today, Wahabi Islam is dominant. The Taliban have the same ideas of shrines, and some local traditions have already been declared un-Islamic. We would call Barth a foresighted anthropologist who studied the Swat population intensely, and his sayings proved very true after four decades.

Ahmed (1976, p. 139) disagrees with Barth's statement of individual commitments at will. He says, “Swat Pathan is born into an interconnected number of social matrices that may continue to determine or limit his choice or strategies. We agree with Ahmed because no individual can leave commitments at his will. After all, the relationship between the tenant and the chief is a mutual dependency. We would rather say a chief may easily find another tenant for his land, but it's not that easy for a tenant to find a chief.

As we have already mentioned, most chiefs are relatives of each other, and a chief cares more for another chief than a tenant. The relationship between tenants and landlords has significantly altered because of the Gulf migration, whereby many tenants now own land and the traditional tenant-landlord relationship has almost diminished. Another reason this relationship has changed is the rise in literacy rates and finding jobs in other spheres. It has become very common among the people of Swat to opt for government jobs that they consider more secure and less labor-demanding.

Ahmed (1976, p. 131) criticizes Barth and terms his study of social relations and political processes as “macro” rather than “micro.” we disagree with Ahmad's criticism. We consider Barth's work a micro-level study of socio-political processes, where Barth discusses all the issues in detail. He further terms Barth's study of Swat Pathans as an “elite study” and not a “Total study.” Indeed, Barth focuses on the elite, and even his hosts have mostly been the elite. Ahmed (1976, p.) further criticizes Barth for not discussing the Political developments that have occurred through the Wali of Swat. Barth covered these developments in his later publications.

Talal disagrees when Barth terms the interests of Tenants and land owners as one:

"I have been in an argument against Barth that the interests of landlords and tenants always go opposite. These vertical bonds between the landlords and tenants have produced long-lasting social impacts in Swat. Such bonds have been their special character - the bonds of solidarity between members of exploiting and the exploited ones".

We disagree with Talal's arguments because the tenant and the Chief depend on each other. The chief's social and political status depends on the fertility of his land (which depends on the tenant's efforts), which helps him feed scores of guests in the Men's house. The same land also feeds the tenants' families and gives them a better livelihood.

Talal also criticizes Barth for ignoring the power exercised by the Chiefs in the broader social network of relationships. Here, we agree with Talal because we do not see Barth discussing the Chief's powers in detail. In a sense, these powers play a significant role in the lives of chiefs and may also help increase a chief's political following. Talal's (1972) point of critique is that it is not the free choice of contracts that serve as the operating system of Swat but the presence of an authoritative land-owning class that exploits the landless and runs the system. Barth has given a detailed insight into the Swat Pathans from different perspectives, which he mainly calls the Political one; we would instead call it an Economic-political approach because it links almost every activity with the economy.

The first point we would like to raise with Barth is the free choice of any tenant to choose any Land-owning chief as his patron and then change his loyalties at any time. It is practically not possible, nor has he mentioned any such cases where a tenant shifts his loyalties to any other chief, keeping in mind that most of the chiefs have the same patrilineal descent and are also tied through different relationships including marriages, the new chief may not welcome the tenant because of his terms with his fellow agnate, who can help him more in stabilizing his political position as compared to a tenant, and the tenant then has nowhere to go.

Barth has focused on the issue of self-interest, saying that land-owning as well as non-land-owning villagers always ally with the groups/individuals advantageous to them both politically and economically and that they change loyalties at times, but he has not been able to write in detail on the role of Pakhtunwali in the lives of the people, as one of the features of Pakhtunwali is "Pat" which means keeping continuing friendship especially in hard times. He has also restricted the notion of "Honor" to land-owning chiefs, which is inaccurate because honor is taken very seriously by the rich and the poor, and everyone tries to defend his and the tribe's honor.

As we found, Barth's "Political Leadership among Swat Pathans " is a one-sided study that mentions every aspect of the chief's life but has very little room for the tenants, who are the founding blocks of the chief's political and economic power. The population of non-land-owning villagers outnumbers that of landowners. Another missing point is the lack of enough data on the small land-holding Khans, who may play a decisive role in the village's political, social, and economic life.

As regards the idea of classifying the world into two broader categories, namely, Hungry men and satisfied men, whom Barth links to the Tenants and Chiefs, respectively, we don't see any discussion of the small land-holding khans, whether they are in the first category or the second. Again, the number of small land-holding khans is always more than that of large ones in any village/ward.

Barth's ideas of Saints do not give an unmistakable picture, as he does not differentiate the roles of Saints, Mullahs, and other people of holy descent. As Barth attaches the role of mediator to Saints, one can find a Mullah also doing the same job and even owning a small land.

Barth also claims that a Saint may acquire property through Inheritance, gift, Purchase, and Conquest. Though Saints mostly have gifted property, we disagree with the idea of conquest because Saints are always well-known for their holiness. If we observe Saints in detail by keeping Barth's point in mind, we will see no difference between a Chief and a Saint, as both own lands, serve as mediators, and use force to occupy lands. Barth also could not highlight the relationship between Saint and Saint in detail. Barth's statement, "*In a series of temporary choices, relationships are dyadic, contractual and voluntary,*" does not fit the tenant's life as the relationship may not always be voluntary. Here, also, the chief's authority alters Barth's statement.

Conclusion

Migration, education, jobs, and globalization have collectively transformed Swat's socio-cultural setup. In addition to these factors, the Afghan wars, Sufi Muhammad's, and later TTP's implementation of the Shariah added to the existing factors. Today, despite its relevance, Barth's work needs to be redone so that a more precise and detailed picture of Swat can be sketched.

Despite some shortcomings, Barth's "Political Leadership among Swat Pathans" is a thorough and balanced assessment of Pakhtun's social, economic, and political setup. Swat remained the focus of local as well as international media around the world as it remained a stronghold of the Taliban, who tried to impose sharia (Islamic law) with force. Hundreds of people have been killed and thousands displaced. Barth's findings would have been different had this study been conducted in today's Swat. Many chiefs lost their authority, and they left their lands to seek refuge in safer places to avoid the wrath of the tenants turned Taliban, who were then the rulers of Swat. The social and political culture of Swat was on the verge of destruction, and it is worth mentioning that Barth mentioned the increasing Wahhabi brand of Islam (in 1959) that the Taliban once tried to impose and gained a good number of followers.

Enormous changes have taken place in Swat since Barth's Swat Pathans. It is also worth mentioning that Barth opened the door to discuss a society that had previously been under-researched from a neutral perspective. Most previous studies were conducted by colonialists who wrote biased and superficial accounts of the people. Most of the accounts were written to serve their administrative purposes.

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