



## Settling North West Frontier Province (NWFP) under British Rule

Zumra Nawaz Cheema

a. National Institute of Pakistan Studies, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan,

**Abstract:** In this paper, an attempt will be made to analyse the significance of the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) for British colonial rule, whether it was a political asset or an economic one. How did the British become able to establish an order in this antagonistic and inflammatory territory? What were the strategic and tactical measures adopted by the British to rule the “unruly” people of the NWFP? Moreover, what actions were taken by the British in response to the Central Powers' activity and propaganda in the area to preserve peace and stability? The British came to India for the sake of trade and commerce, not for the purpose of ruling them. But when they seek that, due to internal conflicts and political instability, India is so weak that it is unable to benefit from its own resources. Then they exploited the internal situation to their own advantage. (To carry out enormous raw material from this resource-rich region, through which natives were unable to benefit properly). They assume that “we” are educated, rational, rich, strong and superior white people.

**Keywords:** Colonial rule; White man's burden theory, Northwest Frontier Province, Pashtuns' history, writing culture, biased ethnography, exploitation, imperialism.

### 1. Introduction:

“They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented”. (Karl Marx, *The Eighteen Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*) (Said, 1978). Pashtuns live in the southern part of Afghanistan and the northern part of Pakistan, divided by the British-imposed Durand Line of 1893. Whereas in Afghanistan, they make up an ethnic majority, in Pakistan, they are about 14 per cent of the total population. According to Pashtun history, tribalism has been the foundation of Pashtun society. Except for the rich Peshawar valley, most of the Pashtun territory consists of dry mountainous terrain near the Hindukush. As a result, the population's needs have not been met by the available agricultural land, leaving its survival dependent on conflict and misadventure. According to Pashtun society, their rapid population growth and service as mercenaries in the Persian and Mughal armies were factors in their ascent to political power. Although attackers from the north were drawn to the NWFP because of its strategic importance as a doorway to India, they would only remain successful in establishing their control and remain cut off from the rest of the world because of the inhospitality of the land. So, under the constant threat of invasion, these people become habituated to fighting for their security and survival. Furthermore, they are not accustomed to remaining under anyone's rule. Strong ethnic nationalism is a prominent characteristic of Pashtun society, which has emerged over the ages. Likewise, under British rule, the NWFP region remained the most sensitive area for the government in terms of political stability and defense. Until the withdrawal of the colonials, they did not accept their rule, and this area remained under regular clashes and violence against the rule. Thus, according to English ethnographers, they can only rule in a way that leaves them to their own and neutralizes them with bribes. This is the only way to keep them peaceful against the government to some extent (Titus, 1998).

### 2. Problem Statement

In this paper, an attempt will be made to analyze the significance of the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) for British colonial rule, whether it was a political asset or an economic one. How did the British become able to establish an order in this antagonistic and inflammatory territory? What were the strategic and tactical measures adopted by the British to rule the “unruly” people of the NWFP? Moreover, the British responded to the Central Powers' activities and propaganda in the area to preserve peace and stability.

### 3. Historical Background

[Received] 29 Mar 2023; Accepted 23 May 2023; Published (online) 06 Jun 2023]

Finesse Publishing stays neutral regard to jurisdictional claims published maps



Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)

Corresponding email: [zumracheema22@gmail.com](mailto:zumracheema22@gmail.com) (Zumra Nawaz Cheema)

DOI: 10.61363/jsse.v2i1.62

The British came to India for trade and commerce, not to rule them. But when they seek that, due to internal conflicts and political instabilities, India is weaker and unable to benefit from its own resources. Then they exploited the internal situation to their own advantage. (To carry out enormous raw material from this resource-rich region, through which natives were unable to benefit properly). They assume that “we” are educated, rational, rich, strong, and superior white people. We have to rule these unruly, disordered people who are illiterate, emotional, exotic, and weak people ([Said, 1978](#)). According to them, the subcontinent was a static region without the potential to transform, progress, or modernize. They are disordered, traditional, backward people; we must develop them (Orientalist Approach). A British anthropologist constructs biased ethnographic writings to present a moralistic view of the facts to the audience, which cannot be questioned. They adopted a misleading developmental approach to legitimize their rule in the subcontinent. According to this, they just rule the Indian people to introduce peace, stability, development, and modernity in this region ([Wolf, 1982](#)).

However, the British took over Indian territories under their control one by one, using diplomatic tactics where possible and force where necessary, and then subjected them to military and civil administration. As a result, the British initiated far-reaching changes in Indian social and economic structures in the 19th century to introduce a colonial capitalist mode of production. Thus, by the end of the 19th century, the Indian capitalist economy had become essential to the European metropolitan industry. India proved a jewel in the British crown. New forms of production emerged in agriculture, commerce, and industry after the dissolution of the past socio-economic setup. The Indian economic system was fully manipulated and incorporated by the British to introduce the capitalistic mode of production ([Alavi](#)).

#### **4. Colonial Policies to Integrate the Subcontinent**

The British adopted diverse forms of policies to integrate the Indian social framework to serve their interests. They employed the developmental approach to legitimize their rule. So, they can illustrate that they came to the subcontinent to modernize and enfranchise this region. Their manipulative policies across India were inconsistent and contradictory. They were only consistent in the way they introduced a capitalist-colonial economic system, using different strategies and policies to best serve their interests in the region. According to Leo Amery, about British objectives, “when they claimed that improving the lives of colonial subjects was as important as providing the industrialist world with access to raw materials and providing markets for British manufactured goods. While in reality, colonial development was a necessity, not a luxury ([Haines, 2013](#)).

#### **5. Strategic Importance of the North-West Frontier Province for British Rule**

In settling their rule, land and villages were the basic factors in British administration. The purpose of this administration was to raise revenues and establish its political base. The areas settled under British rule were greatly transformed in their institutional and social structures. In the Punjab and Sindh, the main purpose was to gain economic benefits, whereas in other regions, i.e., present-day Pakistan’s NWFP and Baluchistan, the British had mainly political or strategic interests rather than economic ones. These were the areas where colonial expansion faced significant armed resistance, and, due to geographical realities, they were not economically advantageous. The cost of developing these regions solely to generate revenue exceeded the revenue they generated. Therefore, the interests of the colonial state were limited to strategic objectives such as securing lines of military logistics to imperial borders, ensuring reliable lines of communication, and keeping out other foreign powers. British governance structures in these regions were designed by military officers. The key strategy in the case of present-day Baluchistan and the NWFP areas was “Forward policy”. According to this, these areas are only brought under the British government through coercion or cooptation ([Gazdar, 2009](#)). The North-West Frontier area, which is populated by Pashtun ethnic groups, and the issue of India's imperial defense were intimately related. Geographically, the region was a key zone of defense with major geopolitical and geostrategic significance to the British Empire's dominance in India. The British Raj in India faced a challenging and varied defense issue with the tribal territories of the NWFP. For India's security, this region needed to be calm, stable, and under effective management.

#### **6. Settling the Frontier Region under the British Government**

The British divided the territory into settled and tribal areas for administrative purposes. The British created a distinct and bizarre system of government for the tribal territories that was unlike anything else in colonial India, designed to maintain the central government's total control over both internal and foreign affairs. The tribal belt in NWFP, notably, remained a strategic and tactical concern for the administration throughout its



time under British authority ([Bangash](#)). The actions and propaganda of the Central Powers, particularly the Germans and Turks, as well as complex and numerous issues and obstacles in the tribal belt, confronted the British Government in India during the First World War. Some of the serious and unsettling factors that may put the British in a disastrous scenario were the influence of the Afghan Amir and the emergence of Pan-Islamism in the area ([Bangash](#)).

Owing to its strategic location (communication route) between Afghanistan and India, the area of the frontier has great strategic importance for the Islamic. It remains a hub of traffic and trade among regions. Moreover, this region also remained the target of repeated invasions by Persians, Greeks, Bactrians, Scythians, Kushanas, white Huns, and Mughals.

### **7. Various Policies by the British Government to Settle the North-West Frontier Province**

The Northwest Frontier Province was first established as a separate province by the British in 1901. Prior to that, it was part of Punjab, as it came under Sikh rule in 1823. The Sikhs, coming from the south, had captured the southern part of Afghanistan and made it part of the Punjabi empire, but their rule was cut short by the British. The British were increasingly anxious about Russia's ongoing expansion in Central Asia and the possible threat it posed to India; thus, they worried about how to effectively control and defend the frontier. Some officials advocated a close border policy, which accepted the existence of the Sikh kingdom and regarded it as a kind of buffer. Others, however, feared that this left a largely ungoverned zone between Peshawar and Kabul, populated by Pashtun tribes with no declared loyalties who might be vulnerable to a Russian invasion. Proponents on this view proposed a "forward Policy" which would advance direct British control and influence beyond the Indus and all the way to Kabul.

Actually, policy vacillated between the two positions. The first Anglo-Afghan War in 1837 arose from the British government's heavy-handed promotion of its favored candidates within the Kabul court but ended in a sound defeat. Afterwards, they reverted to the 'close border' option, signing a tripartite treaty in 1838, with both the Sikh and the Kabul kingdoms. The treaty was, however, soon annulled, and the British reverted to a forward policy. Fighting two wars with Sikhs in 1846 and 1848 and annexing the whole of Punjab and the Pashtun lands as far as Peshawar into their own empire in 1849.

The second Anglo-Afghan War broke out in 1878 when the kingdom of Kabul again resisted British efforts to control its court, and again the British were defeated amid the brutal mountains. In each Anglo-Afghan war, the Pashtuns in the Frontier fought in support of their fellow tribesmen across the Hindukush ([Banerjee, 2000](#)). In 1893, the so-called Durand line was negotiated with the Amir of Afghanistan and drawn up as a formal boundary separating his territory from that of the British. It was drawn to coincide with the Khyber, with the British hoping they could thereby control strategic access to the narrow pass. Gradually, the old routes were joined by railways, tunnels, and zigzag roads driven through the rock to facilitate the rapid movement of troops to defend the border. The railway line rising right through the Khyber Pass itself was finally completed in 1925. In this way, the British made great efforts and expense to seal off the area and to construct a road and "iron curtain" on the fringe of the Raj ([Banerjee, 2000](#)).

Despite their best efforts, the British were unable to impose direct rule over the area and instead chose to govern it from Delhi through local khans, pirs, and mullahs. For the same two reasons previously indicated, special care was taken. First, there was no commercial or economic interest in the region, which limited its significance to British strategy. Second, the Pashtun tribes were fiercely opposed to British colonial control, and almost all of them slaughtered British soldiers and civilians in retaliation, which the latter met with by setting villages and farms on fire. The area was initially preserved as part of the Punjab province because the British had inherited it from the Sikhs, who, during their 20-year reign, had included it in their Punjabi empire. But in 1901, it was recognized as a separate NWFP province. Although it made up about two-thirds of the province's land, the tribal region between the NWFP and Afghanistan was excluded from the six settled regions of Peshawar, Mardan, Kohat, Bannu, Hazara, and Dera Ismael Khan and given the distinct administrative status of political organizations in Malakand, Kurram, Khyber, and North and South Waziristan ([Khan](#)). NWFP evolved into a province with two distinct borders: one separating British India from Afghanistan, and the other separating populated regions from the tribal belt, which was technically part of British India but was in fact no-man's land. To deal with the persistent opposition, special regulations like the Frontier Crime Regulation (FCR), which

allows for the summarily incarceration of a person for life, were developed. The colonial rulers were so afraid of Pashtuns that when they implemented reforms in India in 1909 and 1920, the NWFP was completely shut out, and those who demanded changes were punished using legislation intended for civil offenses ([Khan](#)).

The British settled the frontier plain areas in two rounds. First in 1850s and second in 1860s. The British did not concentrate much on settling the frontier till the 1960s. Prior to that, British moral legitimacy had rested on upholding social and religious conventions that limited personal and economic autonomy. Colonial authorities just codified established norms to resolve unfamiliar family and social conflicts. This approach avoided full-scale imposition of British legal concepts and structures and helped to validate a colonial social role as impartial arbitrator ([Nichols, 2001](#)). The literal groundwork for the formal regular settlement proceeded in the mid-1860s. At that time, the British compiled a record of the villages in the Peshawar valley.

They get involved in religious, constitutional, and educational institutions of the Pashtuns to control them and get revenue from settled areas. The institutional policies of the revenue administration had potential social consequences in Peshawar as in the greater Punjab. The simple choice of the village as the unit of administration might begin fragmenting the familial and clan ties and obligations that linked diverse neighboring settlements, including lineage offshoots ([Nichols, 2001](#)). The British rationalize applying the principle of collective responsibility for village revenue to Punjab districts and the Peshawar area as being consistent with maintaining the lineage-bound of bhaichara village organizations. A Pashtun sense of being one among proprietary shareholders unified by a common history of village settlement was contradicted by awareness of being considered among now jointly responsible 'owners' of a personal piece of land; ownership no longer secured by clan practice but regularized by settlement office records and court based legal decisions ([Nichols, 2001](#)).

The Second Afghan War (1878-81) strengthened the British advance into mountain territory, so in 1893, a boundary, the "Durand Line" between British India and Afghanistan, was negotiated by Sir Mortimer Durand, the Foreign Secretary of the Government of India. The Durand Line placed the previously independent borderlands and tribes under British protection. Political Agents were appointed to maintain informal contacts and to pay allowances to tribal leaders (Khans, Arbabs, and Maliks) to keep order in their areas. Military forces were mobilized when this policy almost invariably failed.

Curzon believed that the only way to deal with the frontier tribesman was "to pay him and humour him when he behaves, but to lay him out flat when he does not". The new North-West Frontier Province was established under a Chief Commissioner and an Agent to the Governor-General. It was made up of five districts (Hazara, Peshawar, Kohat, and parts of Bannu and Dera Ismail Khan) together with the tribal-administered frontier agencies, Khyber, Kurram, and North and South Waziristan. It was formally inaugurated in April 1902 with a durbar in Peshawar, attended by Curzon. At the same time, the army was withdrawn and replaced by smaller mobile units and tribal charges.

Curzon's policy was intended to keep the British in much closer touch with the frontier without interfering too much in local affairs. The tribal insurgency, however, continued, and after the First World War, followed by a short third Afghan War in 1919 and large numbers of Indian Army casualties in Waziristan, policy discussions turned towards plans for military pacification, accompanied by the reform of tribal society, backed up by economic and social development projects.

The British continued their large public works projects in the region and extended the Great Indian Peninsula Railway into the region, connecting the modern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region to the plains of India to the east. Other projects, such as the Attock Bridge, Islamia College University, Khyber Railway, and the establishment of cantonments in Peshawar, Kohat, Mardan, and Nowshera, cemented British rule in the region, and in 1932, the North-West Frontier Province became a Governor's province with its own legislative council. But economic and social reforms proved too expensive and difficult to implement widely. Thus, Insurgency continued, with random terrorist attacks, occasional assassinations, and sometimes major revolts lasting till the end of British rule ([Titus, 1998](#)).

## **8. Conclusion**



In short, though the British adopted various policies to manipulate the region in their own interests, they remain unable to achieve the desired results. Because they tried to implement scientific-engineering, kind of experimental policies to transform the region, which were totally inconsistent with the region's context and ground realities. Ethnographic data played a significant role in the implementation of flawed policies. In the 19th century, the British sent several political and administrative agents to the Pashtun region, who interpreted this society through their own personal experiences. Everyone got a separate image of Pashtun society. (Lindholm, 1980) Thus, the British ethnographic record was unreliable and fictitious, mostly based upon the views of the Khans. In this way, there were many discrepancies between the basic framework of society and the collected data. Therefore, the resulting policies were unsuitable, and the British remained unsuccessful.

### References

- Alavi, H. Colonial Foundation of Indian Capitalism. In.
- Banerjee, M. (2000). *The Pathan Unarmed: Opposition & Memory in the North West Frontier*. James Currey Publisher.
- Bangash, S. Tribal Belt and the defence of British India: A Critical Appraisal of British Strategy in the North West Frontier During the First World War. *Research Journal of Area Study Center, University of Peshawar*.
- Gazdar, H. (2009). *The Fourth Round, and Why They Fight on: An Essay on the History of Land and Reform in Pakistan*.
- Haines, D. (2013). *Building The Empire, Building The Nation*. Oxford University Press.
- Khan, A. *Pakhtuns Ethnic Nationalism; From Seperation to Integration*.  
<http://www.khyber.org/publications/pdf/ethniconationalism.pdf>
- Lindholm, C. (1980). Images of the Pathan: The Usefulness of Colonial Ethnography. 12.
- Nichols, R. (2001). *Settling the Frontier: Land, Law and Society in the Peshawar Valley, 1500-1900*. Oxford University Press.
- Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Routledge.
- Titus, P. (1998). Honor the Baloch, Buy the Pashtun: Stereotype, Social Organization and History in Western Pakistan. 657-687.
- Wolf, E. R. (1982). *Europe and the People Without History*. University of California Press.