

Impressions from the Anjuman Al-Pathan conference Jaipur, 17th May 2015

By Eyal A. Be'ere

It was an overwhelming sight at the auditorium where the second conference of the Anjuman Al-Pathan (the Pathans movement of Rajasthan) was being held. There were about a thousand people in the hall, looking at a screen dominated by the image of an eagle with wings outstretched, and a banner proclaiming "Vive La Education".

I had been invited by the president of the movement, Colonel Abdul Rasool Khan, and the Vice-President, Hassam Muhammad Khan. There were interesting speeches and observations about the Pathans' capabilities, their courage and perseverance, their ambition and excellence in various fields.

In the past, when the leadership was still tribal, the Pathan "Jirga" fulfilled a role similar to that of the "Anjuman", and

acted as an assembly of law makers. The term Jirga is originally Mongolian and means 'a circle', referring to the mode of seating of the assembly. The Jirga, was for many years, the sole authority in all community matters. The Scottish general M. Elphinstone reported in his book *The History of India*¹ that the Jirga played a major role in community life – this reference is about the first decades of the 19th century. The Jirga described by James Spain in 1963 is no different from that of Elphinstone². The very existence of the Jirga for so long proves that custom, society and law are interwoven in the community life of Pathans.

Mukulika Banerjee (2000) wrote that the Jirga is still active in India³. However, it seems that its functions have changed in different regions. It is possible that Jirga is still a force in the Andhra Pradesh province, but Professor Navras Aafreedi from Presidency University contends that in his birth town Malihabad in Uttar Pradesh, the Jirga ceased its activities after August 1947, when India gained independence. There was a decline in the influence of the Jirga in all Pathan regions, and as an alternative they obeyed the Indian constitution.

The historical origin of the Pathans is a subject of interesting contentions and controversies. Some researchers chart their trajectory as descendants of Aryans who migrated to the Indian sub-continent in the second millennium BC; others contend that they are descendants of the ancient Egyptians, or Alexander the Great's soldiers; while some others believe they are descendants of "Bnei Israel".

In the memoirs of Badshah Khan, a Pathan who was also known as Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, a good friend of Mahatma Gandhi – he writes the Pathans were urged to recognize and revere their identity and origins. The massive 1500 year old idols of Buddha in Bamiyan, Afghanistan, (which were utterly destroyed by the Pathans of the Taliban in March 2001); the expensive Buddhist University in Ada near Jalalabad; the Taxila university; and the works of art combining wood and stone – these are all proofs of the advanced cultural ability of Pathans who, in his opinion, progressed no less than the culture of the Chinese, or that of South East Asia. Badshah Khan writes "our splendid culture was taken away from us," (p. 19).

One was pleasantly surprised at the conference, to meet people of great social standing who are well integrated in different branches of the north Indian society. Distinguished men and women from the fields of health, finance, defense, economics and administration, appeared on the podium one by one. It was heartening to see female Pathan doctoral students who have fought against all odds and the dead weight of tradition to reach where they have. Distinguished doctoral students went up onto the stage to the cheers of the audience, followed



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by college students, high school and primary school pupils, all recipients of prizes and accolades for their accomplishments.

One also was fortunate to witness the soulful and poignant music of Nabina, a visually challenged singer with the voice of an angel. The atmosphere at the conference was exuberant; and all the enthusiastic applause expressed their determination to continue in their endeavors – determination to excel in education so that every Pathan man or woman would have the opportunity to succeed, and so that the community would march ahead in turn. The positive and remarkable process that this community has undergone is indeed remarkable.

The president of the movement, Colonel Abdul-Rasool Khan, gave an impassioned speech praising the progress of Pathans in the field of education, and then surprised me by inviting me up onto the podium and embracing me warmly. He declared that the cause of Pathan education is inseparable from the need to reiterate the historical ties with the Jewish people. He emphasized that he intends to write an explanatory booklet about this singular relationship, and he even intends to visit the State of Israel in order to learn firsthand about the historical identification of the Pathans with the people of Israel.

Standing on the podium, I noticed the expression of contentment on the face of Sardar Muhammad Khan, the "Bara Hazari" from the village of Nirwana. He had been an amazing host a number of times while I was researching for a paper on the Pathans' genealogy. This research gained great significance in the summer of 2013 when I discovered that the Pathans have 20 ancient tomes of genealogy which had been founded whilst still in Afghanistan. They were in the safekeeping of Bara Hazari's family. For over 500 years, in accordance with the directives of the Pathan ruler Sher-Shah Suri (1486-1545) – who had the Grand Trunk road constructed, and whose tomb is in Sasaram, Bihar – these families have recorded every birth, marriage and death in these books.

These books are written in Dhundhari, a script that is a blend of Persian, Arabic, Urdu, Pushtu and Aramaic letters. The writing is aligned from left to right. From the initial study of the text we found the records of the first twenty four generations of mankind from Adam to Noah, then Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and his twelve sons, some of who had retained their biblical names (Joseph, Benjamin, Ephraim, Judah, Zebulun and Gad). The others' names had been altered and it is unclear what their sources are. Benjamin (the offspring of Jacob and Rachel), is one of those twelve sons. One of Benjamin's descendants is "Malik-Talot", who is also mentioned in The Holy Quran, and known in the Holy Bible as King Saul. One of Saul's sons is the King Qais Abed-Alreshid, who came out of the mountains of Afghanistan in the seventh century as the leader of a delegation to meet the Prophet Muhammad in the town of Medina, then joined his army, bringing the new religion Islam to the Pathan nation.

This ancient concept has support from many sources, starting from the Greek Herodotus in the 5th century BC onwards and from various Hindu-Afghan chronicles between the 10th and 15th century. Even in modern times, generals, clerics; and British, Norwegian, American and German researchers, living in or working on the Hindi-Afghan regions, write about it profusely. According to these sources, the Pathan people originate from the nation of Israel thus the genealogical books in Bara-Hazari's possession add another important literary-historical reference to this notion.

When the speeches were done and the applause had quietened down, we went out for lunch. During the meal I met many Pathan friends who embraced me and showed their affection for a guest who had come from afar to participate in their annual conference. Many of them took great interest in the research currently being undertaken in the Israeli University of Ariel. I also did face hostility – from three scowling men who approached me and declared that they hated Israel and all Jews, and that in their opinion Israel is an evil state because of its treatment of the Muslim Palestinians. I was taken aback by such a gesture, and it caused me to reevaluate the changes in Pathan hospitality. The Pathans are famous for their devotion to all guests, whoever they may be. And I, who had visited Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and

Kashmir, had repeatedly been impressed by the warmth of the Pathans' hospitality. I was not insulted by the statements of hate. I knew that they stemmed from lack of acquaintance and from hostile press. I secretly hoped that in the near future, some of my Pathan friends would come and visit Israel; and then maybe their anti-Semitic attitudes to Israel and the Jews would be alleviated.

At the end of the conference I found myself sitting next to the "Bara Hazari", surrounded by an enthusiastic group of youngsters who wanted to find their family ties in the genealogy books. Sitting amongst the community scribe and the youth, it occurred to me that the issue of genealogy is still embedded in the hearts of young Pathans, despite standing at crossroads between the stringent Islamic religion and a democratic-secular Indian culture of the 21st century. They still feel linked to the old ancestry which is faithfully recorded to this very day, and when their time comes to get married, they will tie the knot only into one of the families whose name is written in that books.

As an Israeli researcher, I felt that Anjuman Al-Pathan's wish to raise the level of Pathan education is an important landmark, and indicates the revival of the Pathan Jirba in Rajasthan. In this conference one could see how this distinguished caste is reinstating itself historically and in terms of identity, combining the past with present. The Pathans are seeking to build a bridge that connects the two, by wisely promoting education.

Notes

¹ Elphinstone, Mountstuart, *The History of India* (London: John Murray, 1841)

² Spain, James Williams, *The Pathan Borderland* (Publications in Near and Middle East Studies, Columbia University, 1963), 69

³ Banerjee, Mukulika, *The Pathan Unarmed: Opposition & Memory in the North West Frontier* (James Curry Publishers, 2000)