



[Work in progress] Eraser on Paper ii, Graphite on paper, 52 x 35 inches, Imran Channa, 2015, Lahore.

Moving on: Mobility among Tribal Pashtuns

A m m a r a M a q s o o d

We all have reasons

for moving

I move

To keep things whole

Mark Strand

“Keeping things whole” (1964)

A couple of years, I was part of a research initiative centered around the life histories of tribal Pashtuns who had been displaced from the Federally Administered Tribal Areas by U.S. drone attacks and Pakistan military operations. My fieldwork for this research was based in Lahore, where I had previously studied the linkages between religiosity and middle-class politics, predominantly with Punjabi groups. It so happened that some of the people that I had interacted with in the earlier research lived in the same neighbourhood as the Pashtun families that I was now working with on the new project. I would occasionally drop by to catch up with my older informants. Most of them were bemused by my new area of focus and often commented on the difference between themselves and the Pashtun families I interviewed. One of them expressed it rather

bluntly: “I thought you were interested in middle-class people like us. Why are you researching them? Some of them might have money but their *lifestyle* is not middle-class, like ours.”

At the time, uncomfortable with the hostility bristling underneath, I dismissed such remarks. As second-generation migrants who owned small businesses or worked in mid-ranking positions in the private and government sector, my older informants were by no means part of the established middle-classes of



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Lahore. Rather, their self-ascribed social status was aspirational and their recently acquired economic standing was vulnerable. While I could understand the reasons for their hostility towards recently arrived Pashtun migrants, I did not want to reflect upon it. However, the more I learned from my Pashtun informants about their lives and experiences, the more I came back to dwell upon my older informants' comments — although not quite in the way they had intended. I returned to their questions through a concern about prevailing conceptions of mobility, both in terms of physical movement and in relation to socioeconomic improvement. The dominant language and framework deployed to understand mobility in contemporary discourses, whether in national politics in Pakistan or within broader liberal ideology, fails to capture the complexity of the "mobile lives" led by Pashtuns from the Tribal Areas in Pakistan.

In recent years, there has been an increasing focus on the position of Pashtuns who live in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan. Much of this literature has emerged within the broader context of the War on Terror and, like the research project I was part of, centers on drone attacks and military operations in the region. These are, of course, aspects of contemporary Pashtun life in FATA that deserve attention and, indeed, public activism. It is, however, equally important to focus on others forms of long-standing discrimination that may contain extended and under-exposed histories. In focusing on

mobility, my aim is to reflect on one such form of structural discrimination that is perhaps embedded within a larger rhetoric of modernization and upward mobility. Such an approach also allows us to go beyond an ethnic lens in understanding discrimination against tribal Pashtuns and to shed light on broader social and economic processes.

In this article, I move beyond popular representations of FATA to focus on some

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aspects of Pashtun mobility. This is followed by brief reflection on how this form of movement compares with mobility as understood within the broader liberal-secular discourse. I have chosen to use the term "tribal" to distinguish between Pashtuns who, through their official domiciliary status, are residents of FATA and those who belong to other parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. I want to briefly explain the reasons for this choice, while also explicating the epistemological biases associated with the term. Historical work on the region highlights that the colonial distinction between "settled" and "tribal" Pashtuns was arbitrary, linked more to practicalities of governance and geopolitical concerns of buffering British India from the neighbouring Afghan and Russian empires. At a broader level, James C. Scott reminds us that in statist discourses, rather than signifying

some innate difference or qualities, the term “tribe” often denotes a particular relationship with the state – i.e., a refusal to come under its ambit of control. However, the continuing use of structures of legislation and governance based on this distinction, such as the Frontier Crimes Regulation, gives it ethnographic and political relevance. Many Pashtuns from FATA self-identify as “tribal”, and do so in order to differentiate themselves (and their treatment by the state) from other Pashtuns. For instance, many Pashtuns from FATA feel that they are discriminated by the state more than other Pashtuns, who at least have provincial rights. Pashtuns who are not residents of FATA also distinguish between themselves and “tribals” by pointing out differences in dispositions, practices and norms. My use of the term here is not to suggest that any of these qualities are innate. Rather it is to reflect that these constructed differences are relevant in everyday and political contexts.

Popular representations

Popular representations of the Tribal Areas center around its remoteness—a place and people that are removed and different from rest of Pakistan. There is, of course, some historical basis to this conception. The contemporary Pak-Afghan border follows the Durand line, established in 1893, which cuts through Pashtun tribal region, dividing some tribes and their lands between the two countries. This border has been historically porous, allowing tribes access to kin and land on either side. Within Pakistan and abroad, different groups and institutions have

propagated this image of remoteness and difference—and, sometimes, for conflicting purposes. The Pakistani state, for instance, has used this representation to justify its treatment of the region. The continued use of Frontier Crimes Regulation, a law first promulgated by British colonials, the denial of constitutional rights to FATA residents, military operations, and a broader lack of investment in the area are often explained by citing FATA as a special case, one which is different from the rest of the country. Meanwhile, the broader representation of the Tribal Areas as isolated and difficult to govern legitimizes the role of *maliks*, officially recognized tribal chiefs, as intermediaries between the establishment and tribes. These representations undermine the historical connections; for instance, of trade, travel migration; between Pashtuns from the Tribal Areas and different parts of the subcontinent. Robert Nichol's historical shows that, alongside their connections to neighbouring Afghanistan and other Central Asian states, tribal Pashtuns have longstanding networks of migration and trade within the larger Indian subcontinent.

At times, even groups critical of state policy inadvertently strengthen this stereotypical representation of tribal Pashtuns. For instance, in the last two years, various human rights groups and NGOs have raised concerns about the number of people (categorized as “internally displaced peoples” or IDPs) displaced from the Tribal Areas, including criticizing the inadequate arrangements made to cater to their needs. While raising these issues is important and very much needed, it tends to generate a singular focus on

displacement. This, in turn, feeds into a larger narrative that tribal Pashtuns have no connections and contacts in Pakistan outside their own areas. Our research has demonstrated that although there has been large-scale displacement because of the war, it follows from a longer history of movement from the Tribal Areas to Pakistani cities. The contacts and networks developed from this migration has been an important source of

other parts of Pakistan. Some of those who moved away because of the war had previous experience of living in cities and would consider both places home. This, of course, is not everyone's experience, and one cannot undermine the loss of lives, livelihoods and homes that has resulted from the war, nor the plight of those displaced. At the same time, however, it is equally important to not associate tribal Pashtuns with Tribal Areas

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alone, and to see their presence in other parts of the country as a single-event displacement and not part of a longer process of movement.

Mobility, movement and spatiality

refuge. IDP camps are, by no means, the only destination for Pashtuns fleeing the war; many choose to go to cities where they have existing familial and kin networks. For instance, among the forty families that were interviewed in one area in Lahore, thirty-four had hosted or were hosting family members who had moved from the war.

Migration from the Tribal Areas to Pakistani cities is difficult to document because it is, broadly speaking, not a single-event phenomenon. Rather, it is an on-going process, a continuous flow of people and goods between two places. In Lahore, we found that it was commonplace for a part of the family to live in the city, while the other half remained in FATA. Such arrangements were flexible and were organized informally; adult males, along with their immediate family, would take turns living in the Tribal Areas while the extended family lived in the city. Irrespective of whose turn it was, school-attending children would remain in Lahore, while many of the family elders preferred to live in the Tribal Areas, traveling to the city

only when they needed medical attention. Rural to urban migration is often imagined in linear terms. However, the migratory patterns of Pashtuns from FATA, flow in both directions, without permanent settlement in either place.

This kind of arrangement – of living in FATA and in cities – has emerged due to a number of reasons. Although there are some instances in which families began migrating back and forth in colonial times, in most cases, such arrangements started in the last three to four decades. It was the need to supplement subsistence farming with monetary income that initially prompted migration. For the majority of families, it became increasingly attractive to send younger men to the Gulf to work as laborers in the construction industry or as security guards. Those who could not afford to go to the Gulf travelled to work in local cities, usually Karachi, but also Lahore, Peshawar and Rawalpindi, as well as in smaller towns such as Hyderabad and Gujranwala. Migration to the Gulf led to a further need to migrate locally; money sent home was invested in children's education or used to start small businesses (mostly within the transport industry). The lack of schools and infrastructure in FATA meant that such avenues had to be pursued elsewhere. At the same time, however, moving away has not, in most cases, diminished the emotional attachment to land and to the natal village more broadly. This connection is maintained through constant movement back and forth.

The types of employment that Pashtun men from FATA find in cities reflect this need for

movement. Many are involved in seasonable labor, such as working as fruit and vegetable sellers or for wage-labor in the construction industry. Others are employed, again as wage laborers, in steel and iron factories. More prosperous families, however, are involved within the transport industry, either as rickshaw, bus and truck drivers, or as owners of small trucking and transport businesses. Given social obligations, owning or working within such businesses has distinct advantages. For instance, some family members can be left to take care of the business while others are in the Tribal Areas handling other responsibilities. More importantly, in spatial terms, the transport system often overlaps with family and kin networks. The roads and routes used often pass through towns close to FATA, but also through cities and towns where other Pashtuns – from the same or nearby villages – are based, allowing for a strengthening and expansion of existing personal and professional networks. This was once explained to me by Ahmed Gul, who belonged to a small village near Wana, but had been living in Lahore for some years. Ahmed's family was involved in transporting apples grown in South Waziristan to the market in Rawalpindi, and from there to Lahore. Telling me about the weeks that he and his brothers spent travelling, Ahmed said, "roads are our life, we would be nothing without it". The transportation business was the main source of income and it also allowed them to frequently visit family members and friends that continued to live in the village. Business and family commitment were entwined in

other ways too; the routes that they used were dotted by workshops and petrol stations that were owned by or employed other family members and friends from neighbouring villages in the Tribal Areas. Over time, they had developed informal payment arrangements at these places, for instance, they would usually pay a lump sum for petrol or workshop costs after they had received payment for transporting the apples. The presence of these friends and families also helped build a dependable network of security on roads that are otherwise prone to theft and raids.

Progress, modernization and mobility

The overall picture that emerges here is one where horizontal networks and mobility – both between FATA and cities and between cities and towns – are given preference over other kinds of alignments and movement. That is not to say that Pashtuns from FATA are not concerned with socioeconomic improvement and security (a kind of mobility that is often imagined in vertical terms). Rather, my point here is to highlight how this preference for horizontal movement defies commonly held assumptions about mobility within urban Pakistan.

Sensibilities relating to mobility in Pakistan, and within the rhetoric of modern statehood more broadly, are heavily informed by discourses on modernization and unilineal ideas of progress. According to this larger perspective, individual or family progress is predominantly viewed in linear terms; a shift from rural to urban areas, followed by an

upward move in each successive generation. This is, of course, an ideal that has promised far more than it has delivered, but one that remains pervasive across the postcolonial world. It remains to be seen whether the aspiring middle-class Punjabis that I had mentioned in the beginning of this article will ever attain this elusive status, but that is how they gauge their own progress and that of people around them. Pashtuns from FATA are an anomaly within this worldview; the constant movement back and forth from the Tribal Areas, the preference for horizontal linkages over vertical, goes against the middle-class dictum of sedentary life and of regularized labor. Within the neighborhoods that tribal Pashtuns live, their inability to conform to this ideal is often a cause for suspicion and mistrust. Frequent travel and absence from the city was, at best, viewed as representing laziness and lack of enterprise and, at worst, taken as a sign of their involvement in illicit activities, especially terrorism.

Similar assumptions exist within the broader liberal discourse, where horizontal mobility and frequent movement are the symbols of elite and cosmopolitan lifestyles. Lower down the socioeconomic ladder, however, such characteristics are frequently associated with illegality. From the perspective of the modern state, the inability to provide a permanent address and employment record marks an individual as a potential threat, and often leads to assumptions of criminality. The experience of Pashtuns from the Tribal Areas is not dissimilar. During my fieldwork, I found that the majority of my informants, despite numerous attempts, had been unable to

acquire a National Identity Card. NADRA requires that FATA/PATA residents need to appear in their native DAUs (Data Acquisition Units) – the rule does not apply to other citizens – and that their forms need to be attested by the Political Agent in charge of the area. In the recent securitized environment, gaining access to these offices or to the PA is no easy task. Many of them grilled are for hours at check posts as they enter the Tribal Areas and asked about where they have been the last few months. Others, especially younger men, complain that the soldiers at check posts often ask to see their arms and elbows, to see if they have been receiving military training in Taliban camps. Those who do manage to reach the offices are often turned away for not having complete documentation or proof of permanent address.

All too often, an ethnic lens is deployed to understand the different forms of political and social discrimination that exist within Pakistan. As the story goes, it is this “primordial” attachment, typical of postcolonial states across the world, that lies behind political instability and social strife. A focus on mobility, however, shifts attention to the forms of discrimination that are inherent in sensibilities and modes of thinking that stem from ideologies of modernization and development. It is, sometimes, the promise of progress that can be marginalizing of groups that do not conform to its logic. ■

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