

Pakistan: Specific Islam, Unknown Aristocracies

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Preamble by Xavier Raufer

ABSTRACT

Although Pakistan wishes to present itself as an exemplary Islamic country where the functioning of the State and society is fully based on the (male) egalitarian principles of Sharia Law, its heritage and historical links to the functioning of Indian caste-based society persist today through the figure of the Ashrâfs. Camille Verleuw offers an overview of this thinly veiled caste system specific to Pakistan, and its implications for the organization of the Pakistani state and army.

Keywords: Ashrâf, phratries, caste, Sharia, army, Pakistan, India

Pakistán: Islam específico, aristocracias desconocidas

RESUMEN

Aunque Pakistán desea presentarse como un país islámico ejemplar donde el funcionamiento del Estado y la sociedad se basa completamente en los principios igualitarios (masculinos) de la ley Sharia, su herencia y vínculos históricos con el funcionamiento de la sociedad india basada en castas persisten hoy en día a través de la figura de los Ashrâfs. Camille Verleuw ofrece una descripción general de este sistema de castas apenas velado específico de Pakistán y sus implicaciones para la organización del estado y el ejército paquistaníes.

Palabras clave: Ashrâf, fratrias, casta, Sharia, ejército, Pakistán, India

巴基斯坦：特定的伊斯兰教、未知的贵族

摘要

尽管巴基斯坦希望将自身塑造成为一个模范伊斯兰国家，其中国家和社会的运作完全基于伊斯兰教法的（男性）平等原则，但它的遗产以及与印度种姓社会运作的历史联系仍然通

过阿什拉夫 (Ashrâfs) 的形象而存在至今。Camille Verleuw 概述了这一巴基斯坦特有的鲜为人知的种姓制度，以及该制度对巴基斯坦国家和军队组织的影响。

关键词：阿什拉夫，胞族，种姓，沙里亚，军队，巴基斯坦，印度

Preamble

The “French criminologist” mentioned by Camille W. in the following article is me. But after the anecdote hereafter narrated by an old friend, I would experience an even bigger surprise in Washington, D.C., during meetings dedicated to Islamist terrorism, in the company of the official top brass of the anti-terrorism: emissaries of the services, ministries and staffs concerned.

A small preliminary: to read Camille W’s article and profit from it, it is necessary to have first integrated this: it is as impossible to grasp the functioning of the Pakistani State apparatus without having fully understood the logic and the “mechanics” of the *Ashrâf*, as it is to study the Fifth Republic while ignoring the logic and the “mechanics” of the ENA (National School of Administration). Ignoring the *Ashrâf* in Pakistan or the ENA in France, generates the worst errors of analysis. Even the ousting of the United States from Afghanistan in August 2021 is primarily due to this ignorance, which has led to an avalanche of misunderstandings, errors, and prejudices in Pakistan over the years— *ultimately to disaster*.

Now in these Washington, D.C. meetings, having several times ventured the word *Ashrâf*—I soon found out that none of the participants, including some friends in major positions, including in the White House, had any idea what this term meant; even, they did not care at all about it—another indigenous folkloric joke.

War is a cultural phenomenon; indirect strategy, terrorism or guerrilla warfare, these variants of human hostility are also oh-so-cultural. Now geopolitics is invading international relations; in particular, the crucial pivot of Central Asia—an area where Pakistan is playing a subtle game from Turkey to China. Therefore, understanding WHO in Pakistan is playing this game is decisive. Hence the importance of the following scholarly text.

X. R.

Foreword

This short article is the result of a French criminologist's surprise at the reaction of eminent Pakistani jurists with whom he was discussing the Taliban movement¹ created in September 1994 in Kandahar, Afghanistan. In these friendly conversations, he raised the question of the participation in the creation of a group, unknown to him but whose name had been whispered to him by discreet Pakistani sources: "ashrâf." He was answered by a heavy silence!

For the whole world, Pakistan is an Islamic republic with a code of laws based on Sharia law, and basta! It is without remembering or knowing that this country was born from an agreement on the partition of the enormous English-ruled India on August 15, 1947. This partition led to an estimated migration of about 12 million people between the two new countries—and to the massacre of hundreds of thousands of unidentified people, given the lack of identity documents at that time. Nevertheless, hundreds of thousands of non-Muslim inhabitants remained within the borders of the new Islamic state of 803,940 km² (one and a half times the size of France).

The caste system that still exists in the Indian republic has been insidiously perpetuated in Pakistan, the country of the "pâk" (= pur²), and its population estimated today at more than 230.65 million inhabitants (three and a half times that of France), with about five million more men than women³ because the sons are more valued by the families, as in the People's Republic of China.

Caste: No! But strict stratification!

The works of most sociologists or political activists, plus the polls of the media since independence, show that Pakistanis cannot accept the idea of castes (Hindi "jaati," Punjabi "jatta," Sindhi & Pashto "zat"⁴) in their Islamic republic—but are forced to recognize a complete and strict stratification of the population with other names.⁵ Few authors, journalists, sociologists, politicians, etc., denounce the current system inherited from the Indian Empire because the sharia considers it illegal: all male Muslims have equal status (= ar. Kafâ'a) provided that their father and grandfather were Muslims, which is not the case for most of the converts after 1947.⁶ It should also be remembered that Muslim women are only worth 50% of men in a range of legal acts (e.g., in testimony).

Since the conquest of the Indian territories by the Muslim armies, many invaders have claimed to be descendants of the Prophet Mohammad via his daughter Fatima (~605–633 CE) and her husband 'Ali ibn Abitablib (~599–661, assassinated in Kufâ, in present-day Iraq).⁷ This descent is divided between those who claim as ancestor their eldest son Hasan (~624–670, poisoned born in Medina, in present-day Saudi Arabia) and those who claim descent from the other son, Huseyn (626–680, martyred in Karbalâ, in present-day Iraq). Some claim descent from

other children of the couple but also from the first “companions” of the prophet who fought with him after 623 to “spread” the new religion.

On this subject, 53 years of contacts with Muslims in many countries have made us discover how well their education had only concerned the principles and rites, accompanied by a few historical facts. Few of them were able to tell us about the early years of their religion, especially the warlike side of imposing faith in Allah, such as the hundred or so expeditions, battles, and murders during the nine years from the year 623 until the eve of the prophet’s death⁸. It should be emphasized—in the context of our research—that the day after the prophet’s death on June 8, 632, phratries were immediately formed, although less strict than those then well-established throughout the Indian continent, but centered on the prophet’s family, the first followers or companions, and his tribe.

In the Indian Mughal Empire, with its maritime coasts increasingly controlled or coveted by the then European powers, Muslims felt at the beginning of the nineteenth century, under the reign of Emperor Muhammad Akbar Shah (1806–1837, he was to be the penultimate), the need to reaffirm their presence, albeit a minority one, in the face of the Hindus, but above all to recall their powers and their involvement in the management of the empire. Four groups (“firqah”) of these Muslims were then considered the most capable of defending the community. It is not known who baptized them “**ashrâf**,” an Arabic word that has also passed into the Indo-European languages spoken from Iran to Bangladesh.⁹ It means “the nobles, the illustrious, the great characters, the notables, the aristocrats.” It is the plural form of the common noun or Arabic adjective “sharif” = honorable, noble, which is used in the Arab Near East to designate one of the descendants of the prophet. It is a word borrowed by many languages in the world, especially in Europe, in similar forms: it; sceriffo, fr; chérif (1551, sérif in 1528), nd. sjerief, port; xerife, span; je rife, eng; sherif, this last form having then been popularized by the Hollywood westerns!

On the other hand, the rest of the population of the large Indian zone is simply qualified as “**ajlâf**” (= the rude, uncivil, scoundrels, beggars, abject, the rabble) or “**arzâl**”¹⁰ when it comes to the untouchables (= the ignoble, vile, wicked, vicious, defective...). For the historian Edward Gait,¹¹ the opposition ashraf <> ajlaf corresponds to the Hindu division of the population into “dwija,” i.e., the whole of the Aryan invaders facing the Dravidian aborigines or Sudras that they subjugated in the II^e millennium before our era. This division of the Muslim community did not meet with full approval: Mirzâ Muhammad Hasan Qâtil¹² pointed out around 1815 that it demeaned the majority of the empire’s Muslims, such as artisans, merchants, bakers, and dozens of other members of the community.

The Ashrâf

Nevertheless, the reputation of these four groups of notables continued to spread until the conquest of the empire by the British, who established a formidable administration in all fields after 1857, notably to develop the education of the population. One of the main school manuals, “Rasum-i hind” (=Mores of India) published in 1862, popularized the concept of Ashrâf.¹³

For all the witnesses since that time,¹⁴ the Ashrâf include above all the descendants of foreign Muslims, Arabs, Persians, Turkish Chagatai, and Afghans as well as the members of the highest Hindu castes, early converts to Islam: Brahmanes, Rajputs, Kayasths, Khattris, Marathas, who already constituted the Indian elite.

- The **Seyyeds** (variously spelled in Pakistani books: syed, sayyid, saiad, sayyed, sayed, saiyyid, seyed, cf. the sid or seid in Moroccan Arabic, = the Cid of Spanish, French literature...). The Seyyeds claim to be descended from the prophet via his grandsons. These huge family phratries in Pakistan today are the Hasani, the Husayni (or Hosseyeni), the Za’idi (descendants of Zayd), the Rizvi (descendants of ‘Ali ar-Rezâ, also known as Ali al-Ridha), the Naqvi and the Bukhari (descendants of ‘Ali al-Hâdi). The majority of these Seyyeds must be duodecimal Shiites or Ismaé links but other phratries also claim to be from the family of the prophet (= Ahl al-bayt), such as the Sunnis descended from members of the clan of the prophet, that of the Bânu Hâshim, but also from all the other clans of the Quraysh tribe (e.g., the phratry of the Qureishi). At such a level of claim, it is impossible to put a figure on the number of Seyyeds in Pakistan—indeed, in all Muslim countries.
- The **Sheykhs** (or shaikhs, shaykhs, sheikhs...) claim to be descended from the companions of the prophet who took part in the battles to spread the faith to the east of Arabia, and in particular to Sindh from the year 711. Also called “Muslim khatri,” they are in greater number in this province of 49 million inhabitants where they are estimated at more than 11.8 million.¹⁵ Nevertheless, one must add to this number, the converts of the last few centuries, coming from the highest Hindu castes and part of the large landowners (zamindar¹⁶) in Punjab, now referred to as “Panjabi Sheykh.” Once again, their number cannot be evaluated because one cannot rely on the declarations of those counted, as will be recalled in a forthcoming paragraph. This will undoubtedly be the case during the next 7th census in December 2022.
- The **Mughals** stemming from the Turco-Mongolian troops which allowed Bâbur to establish an empire on a great part of the Indian continent from 1526 to 1530.¹⁷ The reign of his son Humâyun (1530–1556) was disrupted by revolts of generals which forced him to go into exile in Iran from where he returned victorious with new armies and imposed Persian as the language of the court and the administration. The actual number of Mughals is unknown. Many

bear the title of “mir” or “mirzâ.”¹⁸

- The **Pathans** (or Pashtun, Pushtun, Pakhtun, Pachtou...). These tribes provided numerous combatants to the Turko-Afghan armies of Mahmud of Gazni and Mohammad Ghori who invaded several regions of the Indian subcontinent during the 11th and 12th centuries. Other Pathan invaders followed. This is finally the only group of Ashrâf that can be counted without too great a margin of error. Today they are estimated to number some 15.75 million in Pakistan (few remained in India after 1947). The Pathans who came from India speak mainly Urdu, which is the “Muslim” form of Hindustani (now called Hindi in India). Urdu (= army in Turkish!), also called “Lashkari” (= military in Persian) is written with a modified Arabic alphabet and a vocabulary influenced by the Persian used at the court of the Mughal emperors (= Dari). To differentiate themselves from the millions of homonymous Muslims, the Pathans often include in their name the title of “khan” (= chief, leader, commander...).

Before going further in the evaluation of the number of Ashrâfs in Pakistan, let us recall a determining fact about the authenticity of the prestigious Islamic titles: during the 1872 census in Bengal (eastern part of Pakistan, which became independent in 1971 under the name of Bangladesh), some 250,000 Muslims of the 17.5 million inhabitants defined themselves as Ashrâf. In 1901, 19.5 million of the 21.5 million inhabitants called themselves Ashrâf!¹⁹

The “Barâdaris”

In addition to the four phratries mentioned above, Pakistan is home to dozens of others. The country does not have a formal caste system identical to that of the Indian Republic, but rather community groups called “Barâdari” (from the Persian “Barâdari” = brotherhood, from the same Indo-European root that gave rise to the Greek “phratría”²⁰). The word “phratría” designates an association of citizens linked by a community of rites and belonging to the same tribe. It is therefore well suited to describe Pakistani community groupings based on ethnicity, language, kinship and economic/social status, in which members are strongly advised to join.

The Barâdaris, also called “quom,” exist in all regions, even in each city or town large. Some are well known, such as the arains (farmers of Punjab and Sindh), the Kashmiris, the Kambhoos or Kambohs in Lahore,²¹ the Moeens or low-class Kammiss elsewhere in Punjab . . .²² Let us nevertheless underline a phenomenon which creates a certain confusion. To escape their low position in the Indian caste scale, thousands of people who did not emigrate to India after 1947, converted to Islam to obtain the same status of good Muslims according to the Sharia. Clearly, this did not please the Ashrâf and other Muslims, especially those descended from the conquerors of Sindh as early as 711 AD or from other Muslim invaders in the 11^e and 12^e centuries.

The American Pentecostal NGO “Joshua Project,” upon returning from an investigation in 2018, revealed the hypocrisy of official Pakistani Islam regarding the status of former low castes. Laws passed in 1992 and 1998, and the relief fund created in 2002, had still not been implemented. These castes were only renamed after their conversion to Islam by names of Arabic origin, such as the Dalits, who are from the “Muslim sheikhs!” Or the 4.4 million Ansaris in Punjab. Surprising Muslim names because they have nothing in common with the Seyyeds or Sheikhs or the Ashrâfs. They are still despised, considered untouchable, and popularly referred to by other names that are just as Muslim but have been diverted from their proper meaning to become humiliating appellations. The working conditions of these groups are still similar to a quasi-slavery in brick factories, agricultural exploitations, breeding, construction companies, public works or administrative services, etc.

Ashrâf and the Army

In view of the four groups referred to as Ashrâf and their history as men of war, it is clear that they form an essential part of the Pakistani army.²³ Their number among the 640,000 or so men in the army²⁴ is indeed secret, only a few of the highest-ranking officers who are very involved in the affairs of state are known to be members of the armed forces. Over the past 15 years, decisions have been taken to increase the proportional representation of Pakistan’s various ethnic groups in the army,²⁵ but the Punjabi and Pathan groups still form a large majority.

It is above all at the level of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) that the “presence” of the Pathans has been most noticed since its creation in January 1948. The ISI officially depends on the armed forces but plays a political role that is too independent and is therefore criticized to the point that it is considered a “state within a state.” The words of its agents during our meetings in Afghanistan in the 1990s revealed an extreme “pro-Pashtunism,” which partly explains the extent of Pakistan’s intervention in its northwestern neighbor.

The use of preachers of the most fanatical Islam from the deobandi school to train the Afghan Taliban was the result of choices made by the ISI leadership in 1994. A Pandora’s box was then opened. Thirteen years later, in 2007, Pathans in Pakistan created a Deobandi extremist movement, the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), to overthrow the Pakistani republic and install an Islamic emirate.

For fifteen years, these fanatics have killed hundreds of Pakistanis, including soldiers, their children and families, Shiites, and Sunni barelvis.²⁶ How can we forget them, while the Afghan Taliban, who impose an extremist deoband ideology on the 22 million inhabitants of their country, have been posing as mediators since May 2022? We will soon come back to the terrorist attacks of the TTP against the institutions of a Pakistan devastated by bad weather.

Endnotes

- 1 The name “Taliban,” which was quickly spread by all media, is a hybrid plural of an Arabic word: *tâlib* = student + *-ân* = plural mark of Iranian origin, from which the word actually means “students.” The normal form of the plural of *tâlib* in Arabic is *tolâb* which is only rarely used in Indo-European languages east of the Arabic-speaking world.
- 2 The translations of Persian words, their forms in Dari or Tajik, as well as their forms in the languages of Pakistan are ours after studies in Iranology after 1969 followed by long stays and activities in these countries.
- 3 www.pbs.gov.pk
- 4 The pronunciation “z” reveals that the borrowing of the Sanskrit form (“*jaati*,” Hindi *jaati*, panjâbi *jâta*,...) in Arabic was then transferred to Persian. Indeed, the initial consonant of the Arabic word is written with “d” surmounted by a point, which is pronounced as “z.”
- 5 Quora, Oct. 2014 or Carole Sahebzadah, Nov. 2018 are good examples of denials.
- 6 “Castes and Muslims,” Rémy Delage, May 2011.
- 7 “L’islam activiste chiite : actualité, perspective,” Leyla N. in “Atlas de l’islam radical,” CNRS Edition 2007.
- 8 Remarkable document on the prophet’s expeditions: https://wikimonde.com/article/Liste_des_exp%C3%A9ditions_de_Mahomet
- 9 The name “*ashrâf*” is also used in Somalia by clans that claim descent from the Prophet’s grandchildren, Hasan and Hoseyn: those of Hasan call themselves *sharif* and those of his brother *seyyed* (study by www.landinfo.no, August 2018).
- 10 The pronunciation “z” is a sign that the word first passed through Persian. Indeed, in this language, three other consonants of Arabic are pronounced like “z.” The 2^e consonant of the Arabic word is written exactly like a “d” with a dot on top.
- 11 Edward Albert Gait (1863–1950), administrator of the Indian Civil Service, published numerous articles on the populations of the Indian continent.
- 12 Mirza Muhammad Hassan Qatil, born in the Khatri caste in New Delhi in 1758, converted to Shiism at the age of 14, a writer who witnessed his time, died in 1817 in his native city. His work “*Haft Tamâshâ*” in Persian (Seven Shows) was published only in 1875 in Lucknow!
- 13 It was written by a schoolteacher, Pyare Lal, but contains aberrant beliefs of the time! The Mughals are direct descendants of Noah and the Pathans are descendants of Saul, the first king of Israel.
- 14 “The *Ashrâf* and *Ajlaf* Categories in Indo-Muslim Society,” Imtiaz Ahmad, May 1967; https://www.academia.edu/3992875/Ashrâf_SOAS_Keywords of David Lelyveld,

“Class, Caste, or Race: Veils over Social Oppression,” Haris Gazdar.

15 https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/18084/PK

16 Iranian word: “zamin” = land + “-dâr” = suffix expressing ownership. The verb “dâran” = to have, to possess.

17 Bâbur was descended from the Turko-Mongol conqueror Timur by his father, and from Genghis Khan by his mother. He had settled in Kabul before going to fight in 1526 against the Sultan of Delhi, Ibrâhim Lodhi, whom he defeated at Panipat.

18 The title “mir” is an abbreviation of the Arabic word “amir” (= commander, cf. fr. emir). The “-zâ” of “mirzâ” is a Persian suffix meaning “born of,” it is equivalent to the suffix “-zâde” of many surnames from the Indian subcontinent (it is the past tense of the verb “zâdan” or “zâ'idan” = to give birth).

19 “The Bengal Muslims 1871–1906: A Quest for Identity,” Rafiuddin Ahmed, 1988.

20 Barâdari is the suffixed form of Persian “barâdar” = brother, cf. ang. brother, nd. broeder, all. Bruder, gal. brawd, lat. frater, etc.

21 “Role of biradari system in power politics of Lahore,” Muhammad Ibrahim, 2009.

22 https://joshuaproject.net/states_districts/PK/PK04 .

23 <https://pakistanarmy.gov.pk> .

24 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pakistan_Army .

25 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inter-Services_Intelligence

26 See *Sécurité Globale* n°10, Summer 2017, chapters on Pakistan, pp. 91–100 and pp. 123–132.