

Book Review: The Frontier Tribal Belt: Genesis and Purpose Under the Raj by Salman Bangash

blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2016/09/29/book-review-the-frontier-tribal-belt-genesis-and-purpose-under-the-raj-by-salman-bangash/

2016-9-29

In The Frontier Tribal Belt: Genesis and Purpose Under the Raj Salman Bangash explores the history of Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas, focussing on how British policies shaped the tribal belt and mobilised religion for strategic ends. Usama Khilji finds the book a fluid and objective guide to understanding the roots of the conflicts that we are seeing unravel in FATA today.



***The Frontier Tribal Belt: Genesis and Purpose Under the Raj* . Salman Bangash. Oxford University Press, Karachi. 2016.**

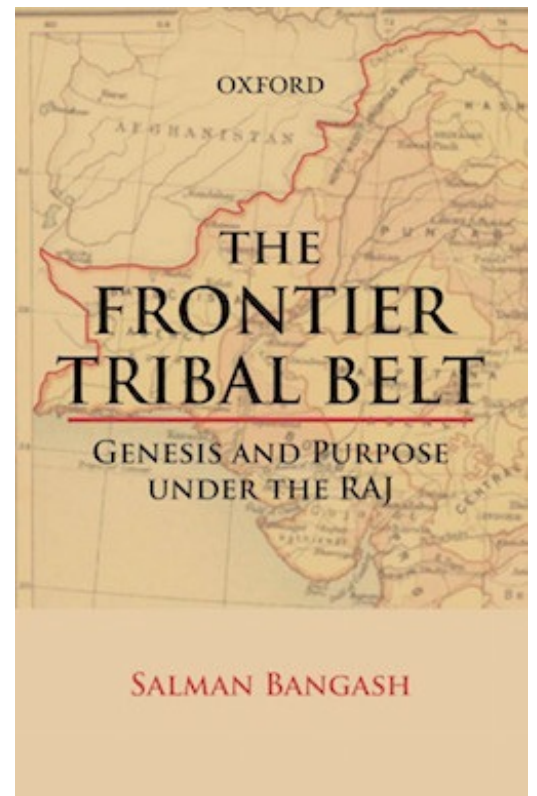
Popular narratives about the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) espouse the view that their residents are wild tribespeople who favour the administrative structure that governs them as something that protects their way of life and their political autonomy. Countering such reductionist misperceptions requires an understanding of history, especially of the British colonial policies that resulted from the imperial scrambles in the region and distinctive social and political conditions of the tribal areas. This is exactly what Salman Bangash sets out to do in *The Frontier Tribal Belt: Genesis and Purpose Under the Raj*.

The book flows fluidly through six chapters that explore intricate developments which shaped the British policy towards the tribal belt. The first chapter provides brief analyses of the topography, ethnography and geostrategic significance of the region. The next two chapters shed light on its territorial importance as a buffer between two imperial powers: Britain and Russia. The last three chapters deal with the unique administrative structure the British government in India put in place in the tribal areas to control the local population.

After the British had taken over Punjab and the frontier territories from the Sikh regime, maintaining peace along the colonial India's border with Afghanistan became a strategic imperative in the face of Russian adventurism. This was achieved through a mix of diplomacy and military means. Loyalty was bought through subsidy paid and ammunition given to tribal chiefs. The [Frontier Crimes Regulations](#) (FCR) 1901 set up a hierarchy of power, with the Governor General at the top followed by Chief Commissioner, Political Agent, *Malaks* (tribal elders) that were paid *muwajjab*, and tribesmen in the same order.

Bangash quotes B D Hopkins, the author of a 2008 book titled *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*, as arguing that "the subsidy policy embedded new hierarchies of powers in Pukhtun society". Bangash asserts that the policy created "rifts in an egalitarian and classless society." The colonial authorities, in other words, did whatever they could to protect the British interests with little to no regard for the consent of the tribesmen. Bangash makes it clear that the British priority in the tribal belt was "not rule of law but support for the colonial structure."

The Frontier Tribal Belt also successfully highlights that Pakistani state has done little to change the British policy towards FATA. It has even kept the FCR intact – with its collective punishments for individual crimes and arbitrary



informal justice system. That continuation, albeit indirectly, provides an understanding of Pakistan's border skirmishes with Afghanistan, drone attacks by the United States across the Durand Line, military operations in the tribal territories and the consequent displacement of the local residents.

The other aspect of the book that makes it relevant today is its focus on religion. British Viceroy Lord Mayo is quoted by the author to have said that the British could easily incite "a jihad against Russia throughout Central Asia" if Russia ever tried moving towards the tribal belt. Religion, thus, has been employed in this region for strategic goals for more than a century; that only continued when the United States, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan used *mujahideen* trained in the tribal areas to fight the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s.

Bangash uses a wide variety of sources, including official documents, biographies, research articles and books which make his book a rather comprehensive academic work. He employs both British and Russian sources to show both sides of the coin, which makes his research pleasantly objective.

The author also demonstrates the British policy in the tribal belt was not a monolith and there were several disagreements among senior British officers and policymakers. He then dismisses the generally held romanticised, mystified view of the Pakhtun tribes even when he says that most scholars agree on their bravery, hospitality and loyalty.

Bangash, however, fails to offer indigenous voices. Not that the local sources are not available on the subject. Sana Haroon's book, *Frontier of Faith*, for example, cites a number of local and indigenous sources while writing about the history of religious mobilisation in the same areas. Further, there is no discussion on the involvement (or lack) of women in this guide to history of FATA, something that is detailed expansively in Akbar S. Ahmed's *The Thistle and the Drone* that any author should pay attention to.

The Frontier Tribal Belt: Genesis and Purpose Under the Raj is a welcome addition to literature on history of FATA from the perspective of the colonial powers that sought to dominate the region. The referral to sources from presenting opposing views make this book an objective guide to understanding the roots of the conflicts we see unravel in FATA today.

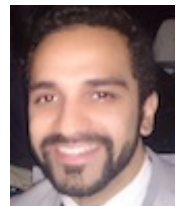
This article was originally printed in the Herald July 2016 issue. It is cross-posted with the author's permission.

Cover image: Jamrud Fort, FATA. Credit: [Khalid Ahmad Dawar](#) Wikicommons

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the Author

Usama Khilji is an activist and Chevening Scholar from Pakistan pursuing an MSc in Comparative Politics at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His interests include minority rights, online censorship, civic education, reform in Pakistan's tribal areas, and peace in South Asia. He tweets [@UsamaKhilji](#) and blogs at [usamakhilji.com](#).



- Copyright © 2016 London School of Economics