

PUKHTUN WOMEN:
TRADITIONAL ROLE,
CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

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The mistimed and uncalled for changes that have crept into the Pukhtun Society of Swat are putting psychological stress on both males and the females. The stress is more profound in the female section of the Society, *an* allusion to the traditional life in Swat in part testifies to it. Being dissociated from one another, the capability of women to contribute to the sustainable development of the region is hampered. They have very difficult access to education facility. They *are* secluded from the outside world. The house hold responsibilities are expanded, and the social change resulted in added stress to the already existing ones. Their household work contribution could not be overlooked. They still contribute a lot to the development of the *area* but the region is still losing approximately half of its talent by ignoring the female section of the Society. Their contributions in the traditional society were not less than men, nor identical though, and their psychological needs *were* fulfilled through various traditional activities too. The female was the sole incharge or member of the household and discharged her duties as head *or* member of the household: she had to go out for bringing drinking water, for washing cloths and for plucking vegetables (*Sabah*). The culture ensured their protection at the (Shat (*Goodar*), the fields (*Pate/*) and everywhere. The men would *never* violate the sanctity of women even inadvertently not only due to fear of retribution but their inherent regard for their tradition. *Goodar* and the field *were* not the places where only work had to be done but gossip, problem sharing and ideas exchange was the common features that occurred there. With blind belief on the western technology and value acceptance have blown, besides other cultural activities, the *Goodar*, the primary *area* where almost all the girls and women had to visit once a day. *Goodar* has attracted poets and folklorists as is clear from the following *tapi*.

بيابہ منگی تہ گوتی نہ کرم
دہ پہ وجہ راتہ جور شوفسادونہ

I will never go to fetch water (from Goodar)

Because this pitcher has led me into troubles

دجلالہ گودرہ واران شپی
پہ جینکو دی سالنہ ے ولگونہ

I wish the ghat at Jalala (a village) were destroyed

It has made the girls asthmatic

پہ گودر سورسالو بنکارہ شو
چا وے پہ تور و ابواورولگیدونہ

A red shawl appeared at the ghat

Someone exclaimed that fire had started burning on water

گودرہ واران شوے واردی تیرشو
دیغلوجونودرلہ نہ راخی سیلونہ

The ghat presents a deserted look

Because groups of unmarried girls don't visit it any more

In addition to these frequent and continuous opportunities of meetings many other opportunities were also provided by the culture to women and girls. Those included the following;

Engagement and wedding ceremonies were favourite occasions for enjoyment. Weeks before the wedding, the girls from the neighbourhood would beat drums (*damame*), sing and dance in the wedding house and the activity would reach to its climax on the day of wedding. Now the social interaction among the women is very *rare* and the diffusion of modern tools of entertainment like TVs, VCRs and cassette players has taken the place of the traditional drum beating etc.

Historically Pukhtun believe in mysticism. Visits to Holy shrines were common especially in spring season. Men and women, in separate groups would regularly visit the Shrines of Saints. Women irrespective of their socio-economic status, walked on foot to the far-flung Shrine of Pir Baba in Buner. *On* the way to Buner they used to *cross* the tough and hard route of Sheratrap pass in Ellum Mountain, singing and beating the portable tambourine (*Thumbel*). It would be *an* interesting adventure cum picnic. And another interesting point is that in such traditional society no one showed any sign of objection. But now it is legend. This kind of outing also drew the attention of poets and they wrote a lot of romantic poems that were *an* input to the body of Pukhto folklore. The following *tapae* are some of the examples.

پہ تعویذونو پورہ نہ شوہ
اوس بہ جولی۔ پہ زیارتونو گر خومہ

The sacred amulets proved less efficacious

The intention to make revolutions around the shrines fills me with hope

پورتہ زیارتہ! رارسیرے
دسوات دسرہ پہ عرضی۔ راغلی یمہ

I invoke you great shrine for help

Because I have traveled from Swat with the hope that my wish is granted

راخہ چہ پیربابالہ لاپشو
دیرزوروردے سوال پہ لارے قبلوینہ

Let's go to Pirbaba (a saint)

He is so great that the wish is granted on the way to him

ویشتلے مایی روغ بہ نہ شے
کہ دبنیرہ پورے وکھے زیارتونہ

The poisonous arrows of my eyes have pierced you
You have no hope of recovery even at the shrine at Bunair

On the birth of male baby the gathering of women was also *an* important occasion. On this occasion a special kind of dish had to be prepared, called *Laitai*. The aged and experienced women were specially invited to prepare the dish. Circumcision was a time of great pomp and show. After the act of circumcision, the village drummer (*Dum*) would start drumming and the women inside the house would spontaneously burst into dancing and the old women would shower nuts and dry fruits on them. Now such activities are rare.

In the month of June (*herd*) young girls in a house would sit together to *prepare* spaghetti to feed to their brothers and their brothers friends. Learning to read Quran the girls used to visit the home of *an* old women teacher. Here they not only learnt the recitation but also enjoyed themselves on swings. Cooking of special rice dish on the 10th day of Muharam collectively in one house and sitting around the fire place, singing praising songs for the martyrs of Karbala, was a regular ceremony for the young girls.

Collective cleaning of grains and mud plastering in the houses were also interesting activities. Women painted on mud walls inside the house and mud carving art on mud grain storage (*Kandoo*) were the expressive arts of the women. But the diffusion of ready made concrete tiles and modern architecture replaced their art. These kinds of activities are also rare.

On Eid days women would visit shrines not only for the sake of entertainment but other purposes were served by the gathering *as* well i.e., the interaction among girls would culminate in lasting relationships, girls would display their new clothes, women of low strata would sell things and general exchange of views on different subjects would take place. Such activities do take place but on a very small scale.

In the new social set-up the said activities, could not be carried out the way they were carried out in the past. Furthermore, their revival in original form is out of question due to many reasons, alternative activities that do not conflict with the prevalent local customs of the people can be sought, to ensure female involvement on the one hand, release them from depression and frustration on the other.