

Sandakai Mullah: Career and Role in the Formation Of Swat State, Pakistan

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Wali Ahmad¹, known as Sandakai Mullah (*Mulla*), was born at Sandakai, a small village in Chakisar, Swat. Detailed information about his early life is not available because he discouraged those who inquired about his personal life. However, he used to pray for his stepmother and considered her harshness towards him as a blessing in disguise.² Born in a religious family; he was given religious education by a local teacher on the traditional lines.

After his early education he became a student of Jutba Maulavi (Mawlawi)³ and studies the recommended traditional courses of theology. After the completion of his studies under the supervision of Jutba Maulavi, he travelled from place to place but could not adjust himself in the local environment. One day he came to Kormang Haji Sahib⁴ and gave him some thing like gold as a present for Jutba Maulavi. When Jutba Maulavi received the present he angrily remarked that he thought Wali Ahmad would make himself gold, but became alchemist, instead⁵. Wali Ahmad then changed his mind and decided to seek higher education. He "travelled widely in pursuit of religious inspiration and religious study."⁶ Madrasah-i-Deoband was a recognized religious Institution in India at the time. So Wali Ahmad proceeded and studied there. He then visited Makkah for the performance of *Hajj* and travelled to Syria, Baghdad and other centres of Muslim civilization.⁷

When he returned from abroad he came to Peshawar and opened a religious school (*madrasah*) at Tahkal. In those days Haji Sahib Turangza'i was working against the British. Haji Sahib opened many independent schools to educate the new generation according to the teachings of Islam and to counter the motives of the missionary schools. Wali Ahmad was very much inspired by Haji Sahib. He opened another *madrasah* in Kalo Khan in Swabi. The English had doubts about these *madrasahs* (religious schools).

At the time Pukhtoon areas were divided in two portions, the settled and the Yaghistin. The Yaghi, i.e., Muhmand, Bajawar, Dir, Buner and Swat areas provided refuge and a base for volunteer recruitment of the enemies of the British government. So, Wali Ahmad came to Swat, in 1910, for organizing the people in Swat and Kohistan against the British.⁸

During his stay in Swat he deeply studied the society of the Yousafza'is of Swat and decided to stay there permanently. He embarked upon the project to clean the society from innovations. To justify it he claimed that the Prophet (P.B.H.) has ordered him, in a dream, to work as a reformist in Swat.⁹ For financing his schemes he chose trade of timber through the river Swat by the traditional way of wood transportation called *Heer*¹⁰ to be sold in the settled areas and the income to be spent on the *madaris* and purchasing weapons.

Wali Ahmad (Sandakai Mullah) now challenged the aberrations in Islamic customs and rituals prevalent in Swat. To achieve his goal he focused his struggle on the formation of an Islamic government in Swat.¹¹ He was very serious and tight lipped about his mission. He considered the Yousaf Za'i society of Swat an Islamic one, but polluted by un-Islamic customs and innovations which needed to be cleansed. Before launching his reform movement, he formed and took into confidence a twelve member council, of persons who were prominent and influential in their respective areas.¹²

As Sandakai belonged to the region, the socio-political setup of Swat was not beyond his grasp. To make a place for himself in the socio-political setup he tried to project himself as a religio-political leader. But a leader "had to be a charismatic personality, powerful by virtue of his generosity, bravery and vengefulness."¹³ Sandakai had a force of fifty to sixty *shaykhs* (disciples) equipped with latest weapons who were ready for every kind of action ordered by their *pir*. His first action was against the practice of *mateez*.¹⁴ He issued a *fatwa* (religious decree) declaring the practice un-Islamic and, generally, not only killed the accused who was not ready to comply with his orders and to surrender the woman but also took action against those who had given asylum to such people, irrespective of their power and prestige.

The action was in conformity with the psychology of the people because he acted firmly and decisively, and got popularity among the people. He established his own mobile *Shari'at* Court.

The reform Movement made him powerful and influential. He started interference in the day to day affairs. He tried to compensate and remove the grievances of all those who approached him irrespective of the status of the accused¹⁵ and gained the status of a saviour. He declared many prevalent practices such as *Qada 'Umri*¹⁶, *Iskhat*¹⁷ and visiting shrines of saints etc., as innovations in Islam. Thus many *mullahs* (*mullas*) opposed him including the *Qadi* of Shokh Dara and *Mullah* of Mamdherai. The old men of the area narrate how God destroyed those and made them a lesson for others who refused to obey his order or request.¹⁸

Politically there was no government and central controlling authority in Swat at that time and the people were living under their own code of life called *Pukhtu*. That is why the era is known as the period of *Pukhtu*. There have always been two parties in these lawless lands. When one party weakens, it begins to intrigue with some neighbouring ruler, hoping to induce him to come in, occupy the country and enable his supporters to work off their vendettas on their stronger opponents and so redress the balance

Generally speaking the term *shaykh* denotes a religious preceptor, guide or an elderly person - *Ed. of power*.¹⁹ So, working in the same manner, Jalal Khan and Yousaf Khan intrigued with the Nawwab of Dir in 1908 and with his support defeated their rival party. Though they emerged victorious with the Nawwab's help, they lost Nikpi Khel and Shamizai to the Nawwab when he built forts at Kabal and Nal. The Nawwab's soldiers started collecting tithe (*Ushr*) and some incidents in this respect created] hatred among the locals against the Nawwab's occupation. However, they were unable to challenge! the authority of the Nawwab in the absence of a common leadership. A Mian (Miyān)* of Ningwalai, 'Abbas, discussed the issue with Sandakai Mullah. They agreed and sorted out a plan to oust the forces of Dir because their expulsion from Swat was a part of his mission for the establishment of an Islamic state.

It dawned upon the inhabitants of Swat, after Sandakai Mullah's separate meetings with all the Khans of Swat, that unity among them was necessary) Sandakai Mullah convened a secret meeting (*Jarga*) (also *jirgah*) of the Khans in a graveyard at Matta .The Khans of Jinki Khel, Shamizai, Sibujni and Nikpi Khel, irrespective of their differences, took oath in the *Jarga* that they would support Sandakai Mullah, in

eliminating the influence of the Nawwab of Dir from Swat. It was further agreed upon that they would choose a common leader. Masam Khan, Habib Khan, Gul Muhammad Khan and Taj Muhammad Khan were the staunch supporters of Sandakai Mullah in the said movement. Consequently, the authority and interference of the Nawwab of Dir in the affairs of Swat was done away with.²⁰

The people of Shamizai, Sibujni and Nikpi Khel, under the command of Sandakai Mullah, defeated the Nawwab in 1914, which made the former a political leader. Besides, he appeared on the scene as a charismatic spiritual figure. His followers said: "We won the battle with the spiritual powers of the Babajee when he threw charmed sand towards the enemy they became paralyzed. Babajee ordered (us) to snatch their weapons and we obeyed the command."²¹

After the defeat of the Nawwab of Dir, the inhabitants of Swat were well aware of the fact that the Nawwab would again make a bid for Swat

* Miyan, an address expressive of kindness or respected good man, master, lord etc. - *Ed.* they became worried for the defence of their territories. Sandakai Mullah suggested the idea of having a centralized organization. He invited Miangul 'Abdul Wadood ('Abd al-Wadud) to be the ruler of Swat but he refused to accept the offer. Besides some other complications, his own brother was a hurdle in his way.²² Thereupon Sandakai Mullah and his supporters, the Khans of Swat, invited Syed 'Abdul Jabbar Shah ('Abd al-Jabbar Shah) of Sithanah from Amb in 1915 to be the ruler. The tribes of Swat finally combined in a confederacy against the Nawab of Dir, but elected as their head Syed 'Abdul Jabbar Shah, a grandson of the former leader Syed Akbar Shah."²³ The last *wali* (ruler) of Swat says:

He was always very polite, rather a paternal looking man. He was a good scholar and orator. But he was a stranger to these parts; and though he came, and very swiftly set-up some kind of state administration, he never brought his wife and family here. I think he was not confident that he would remain here.²⁴

At first the people did not believe that the State would work. However, those ambitious to rule, when realized that their apprehensions were unfounded and that he had successfully established state machinery, started propaganda against 'Abdul Jabbar Shah. Besides, the state was weak because the real power-wielder was Kohistan Mullah (Sandakai Mullah) and he was anti-British, so they (British who were already controlling major portion of the Frontier) wanted to replace 'Abdul Jabbar Shah with a person who would do away with the influence of Kohistan Mullah and would quell bad feelings against them.²⁵ It is also said that 'Abdul Jabbar Shah became *persona non grata* for the British for his sympathies with the anti-British Jihad movements and its activities. Consequently he relinquished the throne in Swat.²⁶

On the other hand, the political developments inside the state were not going in favour of 'Abdul Jabbar Shah. The murder of Zarin Khan, a great Political leader of Nikpi Khel made the Khans suspicious and they reconsidered their loyalties towards the ruler.²⁷

At the time the information poured into Swat that 'Abdul Jabbar belonged to the Ahmadiyah sect (the heterodox sect founded by Ghulam Ahmad of Qadian). This news spread in Swat like jungle fire. "So Sandakai Mullah and other Mullahs agitated against

him - these people hate the Ahmadias and other heterodox groups: because they are all Sunnis in Swat." They told him: "Either you swear that you are not a believer in Mirza (Ghulam) Ahmad, or you go." He said: "You brought me peacefully; you should send me peacefully, without molesting my relatives and servants." So they turned him out - peacefully.²⁸

Miangul 'Abdul Wadood was the main political leader in Swat who was behind the struggle against Abdul Jabbar Shah. Being a descendent of the Akhund²⁹ of Swat and the prospective leader for the ruler ship of Swat, Miangul Abdul Wadood was once more offered the seat. A big *Jarga* of the tribes assembled at Kabal making him the *Badshah* (king). The turban was tied around the head of Miangul 'Abdul Wadood in September 1917. Sandakai Mullah, who had first brought and made 'Abdul Jabbar Shah as king in Swat, drove him out and enthroned Miangul 'Abdul Wadood as the ruler of Swat, playing the role of king maker and king breaker. Nevertheless, with the passage of some time, his relations with Minagul Abdul Wadood also became strained. The Badshah was disappointed with him. He, therefore, worked and tried to reduce and diminish his role and influence. Their "Coalition broke up, and the Badshah and the Sandakai Mullah became rival pretenders to leadership."³⁰

Sandakai Mullah, once more, started living as a *pir* in Upper Swat and started his former activities of reformation. He focused his attention on the eradication of innovations and un-Islamic rituals. He re-established his mobile *Shari'at* Court and executed his orders.

The Badshah considered his presence and influence a serious threat to his power. In spite of the fact that he believed that a *pir* and a ruler cannot rule at one and the same time and that one of them should be the ruler, "he could not kill or destroy the Sandakai Mullah, because all the people of Upper Swat ... rather most of the Khans there were very much in his favour. So ... [the Badshah] told one or two persons to go and visit the Mullah, and confidentially let it be known to him that Badshah Sahib was going to kill him."³¹

Khan Bahadur Sultanat Khan was the follower of Sandakai Mullah and supporter of the Badshah. He had a meeting with the Badshah and assured him that he would convince Sandakai Mullah to leave Swat. The Nawwab of Dir also did not like Sandakai Mullah, due to his former anti-Nawwab role.³² Now, Sandakai Mullah had either to leave Swat or be exterminated. Though he had held influence among the people and also the support of a powerful *dalla* (*dal*: party) of Khans previously, the situation had taken a turn, because 'Abdul Wadood had made his position stronger and he could not be easily challenged. The *dalla* of the Khans who followed Sandakai Mullah previously were now the main supporters of 'Abdul Wadood. They were not ready to side with Sandakai Mullah openly, to displease the Badshah and so lose his confidence and their privileges and position. So, ultimately Sandakai Mullah left Swat in 1920 and went and settled in Kohan, Dir, where he died a natural death in 1356 A. H.

The man died issueless, penniless and homeless but left a mark to be remembered by the later generations.

Notes and References

1. Wali Ahmad is popularly known by the names of Sandakai Mullah and Sandakai Baba in Swat. Roshan Khan mentions his name as Ahmad Jan. Roshan Khan, *Yousafzai Qaum ki Sarguzasht* (Urdu), Karachi: Roshan Khan and Company, 1986, p. 237. 'Abdul Ghaffar Khan called him Kohistan Mullah. 'Abdul Ghaffar Khan, *Zama Zhawand Au Jadujahd* (Pukhtu), Afghanistan, p. 124. Whereas a book *Dala'il-i-Khayrat wa Sadaqat*, which is in the possession of Maulavi Rahim Ullah, carries an entry on page 279 by Muhammad Qamar {*Jura Ustad Sahib*), the vicegerent (*khalifah*) of Sandakai Mullah, which states his name as Wali Ahmad. Many religious scholars (who have been interviewed; confirm the later, i.e. Wali Ahmad.
2. 'Abdul Qahar ('Abd al-Qahar) Maulavi of Shah Dherai, Swat. Interviewed on February 10, 1997.
3. The real name of the Jutba Maulavi is not known. Born in and belonging to village Jutba in Shanglappar, Swat, he was a prominent religious teacher of the time.
4. Kormang Haji Sahib who died three years ago in Islamabad at the age of 120 years travelled along with Wali Ahmad as a disciple.
5. Rahimullah (Rahim Allah) Maulavi (80 years old, and a well known religious scholar and Director of the *Madrasah Mazhar-ul-TJlum* Mingawara, Swat) on the authority of Kormang Haji Sahib. Interview Feb. 16, 1997. It may be deduced that these narrations by these religious scholars without their negation speaks of their firm belief in their truthfulness and so of their belief in such myths and superstitions.
6. Fredrick Bath, *The Last Wali of Swat*, Norway: Norwegian University Press, Oslo, 1985, p. 29.
7. Rahimullah, *op. cit.*, on the authority of Kormang Haji Sahib.
8. Allah Bakhsh Yousafi, *Yousaf Zai* (Urdu), Karachi: Muhammad Ali Educational Society, 1960, p. 469.
9. 'Abdul Qahar Maulavi, *op. cit.* On the authority of Shaykh Mirbaz Khan of Shah Dherai, Swat, who was one of the *Shaykhs* of Sandakai Mullah.
10. 'Abdul Qahar, *op. cit.* Zain ul-'Abideen (Zain al-'Abidin), 78 years old, on the authority of the Pir Sahib Kormang, interview Jan. 5, 1997.
11. Once when Sandakai Babajee was sitting with his *Shaykhs*, one of them sang a *Tapa* (*Pukhtu folk verse*).

وطن دزير و گلوباغ دې
په زړه مې داغ دې ريژوې

Trans: **The abundance of flowers has glorified my land. But the brevity of their life (flowers) makes me gloomy.**

Sandakai Babajee spontaneously replied:

وطن دزير و گلوباغ دې
خره به يې جوته کړې ورته نيشته دے شپلونه

Trans: **The abundance of flowers bestows incomparable beauty on my land. But the absence of fortification makes the asses desecrate it.**

(The Tapa reflects his wish and the aim of his struggle). Shaykh "Aziz Ahmad, 115 years old, of Chupriyal Village, Upper Swat. Interview video tape on Jan. 3, 1993.

12. Five of the members were: Jurah Maulavi, Deolai Maulavi, Delay Maulavi, Zormandai Maulavi, Mahmddherai Maulavi (who later on defected). The remaining seven members are not known.
13. Charles Lindholm, "Contemporary Politics in Tribal Society: Swat District, Pakistan", Asian Survey, vol. XIX, No. 5, May 1979, p. 437.
14. Mateez: A person who keeps some other's wife without his divorce and treats her like one's own wife.
15. It is noteworthy that Masam Khan, a prominent Khan of Shamizai, Swat, killed a *shaykh* of Sandakai Mullah, who asked him to comply with the orders of Sandakai Mullah.
16. The practice of performing five extra prayers after the *Jum'ah* (Friday) prayer, with the *imam* on the last Friday of *Ramdan*, believing that it is suffice in lieu of the prayers not offered for seventy years is called *Qaza (Qada) 'Umri*.
17. The practice of distributing money, soap or something else after performing of the funeral prayer, at the site, believing that it compensates the prayers not offered and the fasts not kept by the deceased person, in the course of his life, is called *Iskhat (Isqat)*.
[*Asqat*, plural of *saqat*, literally means goods, furniture of little value or taking away'].
18. The incidental death of Masam Khan of Shamizai psychologically affected minds of the people of Swat (who believed in such myths) that the death was caused by the Sandakai Mullah's curse.
19. R. Schomberg, *Between Oxus and Indus*, reprint, Lahore: Al-Biruni, 1976, p. 242. Quoted in Charles Lindholm, op.cit.

So, a Pukhtu proverb says:

کہ خانې غوارے نو دیرتہ لار شه

Trans: **If you want to be a Khan, you may go to Dir.**

20. Roshan Khan, op. cit., p. 336.
21. 'Abdul Qahar Maulavi, op. cit., on the authority of Khan Bahram Khan of Shah Dherai, Swat, who was a close friend of Sandakai Mullah.
22. Muhammad Asaf Khan, *Tarihh-iRiyasat Swat*, Urdu, Lahore: Feroz Sons, n.d., p. 176.
23. Fredrik Barth, *Political Leadership among Su-at Pathans*, London: The Athlone Press, 1959, p. 128.
24. Fredrik Barth, *the Last Wali of Swat*, p. 30.
25. 'Abdul Ghaffar Khan, op. cit., p. 124.
26. Muhammad 'Ali Qasori, *Mushahidat-i-Kabul wa Yaghistan* (Urdu), Karachi: Anjuman-e-Taraqi-i-Urdu Pakistan, p. 76.
27. Malak Muhammad Bacha of Hazara, Swat, 84 years old. Interview.
28. Fredrik Barth, *The Last Wali of Swat*, p. 32.

29. 'Abdul Ghafoor, Akhund of Swat, born in 1794 and died January 12, 1877, popularly known as Saidu Baba, was a mystic, For details please see Dr. Sultan-I-Rome, " 'Abdul Ghafoor (Akhund) Saidu Baba of Swat: Life, Career and Role", Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society, vol. XL (July 1992, Part-III), pp. 299-308.
30. Fredrik Barth, Political Leadership among Swat Pathans, p. 128.
31. Fredrik Barth, The Last Wali of Swat, p. 47.
32. 'Abdul Qahar, op. cit., on the authority of Khan Bahram Khan, interview on Feb. 16, 1997.