Pashtun Millennials: Striving for Alternative Futures

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Written and visual accounts about Pashtuns are very often illustrated with pictures of elderly men with long beards and big turbans or young, rugged-looking men with shoulder length hair, ammunition belts wrapped around their bodies and guns ready to shoot. These pictures can be grainy black and white photographs from colonial-era tribal leaders, or high-definition pictures from the past year. Even though there are many more stories to tell and conditions and circumstances have changed radically, a certain type of framing of Pashtuns as an ethnic group[1] persists that keeps legacies of the colonial era intact. Hence, discussions with and about Pashtuns and their historical homeland in today's Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands are framed by these colonial historical legacies that have been shaped by geo-politics. In the past decades, conflict, extremism, migration, political volatility and increasing scarcity of resources in a resource-abundant region have been added to the mix of stereotypes and prejudice that are in use. Often, it is more telling what and who does not appear in these narratives and reporting. As various scholars remind us, it is difficult to break free from established frames (de Sousa Santos 2014, Mignolo 2018, Said 1979).

Colonial officers, travellers and agents referred to the people living in the so-called North Western Frontier as Pathan, a British term for Pashtuns (Haroon 2011; Kakar 2023).[2] These accounts about Pashtuns

laid the framework for ensuing othering and exoticisation. From the point of view of Delhi, where the British colonial rule was headquartered, this frontier acted as a buffer zone to Russian imperial interests and hence governance styles differed to the core provinces of British India. This also had an effect on how the people living in these areas were treated and portrayed. Since foreign travellers and officers had little access to private quarters and hence they had little contact with women, these accounts are also highly gendered. The stereotypical imagery of Pashtuns included their depiction as masculine, anti-women, barbaric, ''tribal'' in the sense of primitive, independent, fanatic, martial, and war-mongering people. They were looked at with both fascination and fear. These tropes have transcended the colonial era and have permeated modern literature, domestic and global media coverage and policy-making (Kakar 2023). It is important to understand that such 'superficial understanding and prescription has had and continues to have devastating consequences for the region' and its people (Devasher 2022, xv).

Especially since 2001, and the onset of the US-led so-called War on Terror, the Pashtun regions in Pakistan and Afghanistan have seen high levels of volatility, militancy and violence, which has had harsh economic, social and psychological effects on the population. The population of this region has lived in a perpetual state of exception (see Agamben 2005). With the War on Terror, colonial depictions of Pashtuns, even though they were never fully gone, were revitalised and became more pronounced. The area is predominantly viewed through the lens of security and terrorism. These gendered and racialised tropes do not allow room for development and change and they make it difficult to develop new original stories. The depiction of Pashtuns in Pakistani and global media, in donor activism and policy-making, and in many academic accounts is, therefore, a textbook example of Edward Said's Orientalism critique (1979).

Amidst these persisting stereotypes, a shift has emerged over the past couple of years, especially when we look at accounts of the younger generation of Pashtuns—in Pakistan and Afghanistan and in the diaspora—those who are currently in their mid-20s to mid-30s. Rather than perpetuating historical caricatures, this dynamic cohort steps out of the defensive mode and actively contests established frames by adding their own accounts of their identity rather than accepting external impositions. These contestations take place on many platforms and via diverse media and includes music, poetry, social networks, or activism. These trends are also reflected in recent academic literature. Some examine the expression of identity through music, dance or poetry

(Ashraf & Farooq 2022; Caron & Khan 2022; Dinakhel 2020; Griswold 2018; Khan 2022), others add local histories (Gul 2020; Qadir 2015). Various other studies demonstrate the impact of terrorism and conflict on the region, and they centre on the experiences of people and everyday life (Alimia 2018; Alimia 2013; Bano 2023; Chaudhry 2013; Daulatzai & Ghumkore 2023; Khan et al. 2023; Kakar 2023; Ud din et al. 2012). Others illuminate the impact of social change on society (Attaullahjan et al. 2019a; Attaullahjan et al. 2019b; Shah et al. 2020; Ul Haq et al. 2023; Yousaf 2019; Yousaf & FurrukZad 2020).

A number of studies have sought to include the perspectives of women (Naseer 2019; Naseer 2017; Din 2023; Rahim 2019; Batool 2016) and marginalised and vulnerable communities (Khan 2023; Ashraf 2021), including migrants and displaced people (Alimia 2022; Fleschenberg & Yusufzai 2020) to add nuance to our understanding of the region. Moreover, borderland studies have emerged globally as a conceptual and methodological lens to analyse in-between spaces (e.g. Brunet-Jailly 2010). A number of scholars have advanced a locally grounded borderlands perspective to study the Pashtun regions in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Caron 2016; Jan & Aman 2014; Raza 2015; Raza & Shapiro 2020). Many of these authors cited above are early career scholars and could be counted as millennials. While these accounts need to be critically engaged with too, because there is always the danger of nativism, nostalgia and the perpetuation of hegemonic structures of power, they are also an expression of self-assertion and testimony to a generation that is no longer silent.

The generation we call the Pashtun millennials has started to shape academia, social movements, and political ideologies. They are important to reckon with because millennials constitute a sizable portion of the population in Afghanistan and Pakistan. They generally more educated than preceding generations and in the next few years they are about to take over leadership and decision-making positions. This is why it is pertinent to inquire: How do these individuals navigate the complexities of their present reality? How do they make sense of themselves and their communities?

This is how the idea for this FOCUS section evolved. With the generous support and funding of the Chair of Societies and Cultures of South Asia, Prof. Dr. Michael Mann (Institute for Asian and African Studies, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin), Mateeullah Tareen and Sarah Holz, organised a conference entitled ''Pashtun millennials in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Striving for alternative futures'' from 3rd to 4th November 2022 in Berlin. We wanted to explore the activities, practices, struggles, opportunities, hopes and dreams of Pashtun millennials in Afghanistan

and Pakistan by engaging early career researchers. Central questions of the conference were:

- What are the contributions of Pashtun millennials to their society/community?
- What kinds of socio-economic, political, religious and educational activities do Pashtun millennials engage with to bring about change or conserve the status quo?
- How do Pashtun millennials engage with contemporary issues in academia, media, civil society and politics?

Some of the contributions in this FOCUS section were presented at this conference. Along the way, we also picked up contributions of those who were not able to make it to Berlin, and Abida Bano joined our editorial team. In the following, we provide a preliminary frame of the topic, present themes that emerged from the papers and reflect on the discussions we have had so far and our own experiences.

Pashtun millennials

People born from 1982 to 1997 are called Generation Y or Millennials. Coined by William Strauss and Neil Howe in their book *Generations* (1991), the term "millennials" was deemed fitting for the first generation to enter adulthood in the new millennium. Millennials are generally regarded as digital cohorts, swiftly embracing and adapting to new technologies such as smartphones, social media, and streaming entertainment (Considine et al. 2009). Compared to preceding generations, millennials are the most highly educated generation and generally have a more liberal political outlook (Parker et al. 2019). However, it has also been noted that subsequent generations have the potential to surpass millennials in all these aspects. Other traits that are used to characterise millennials include voluntarism and civic engagement, i.e. they are willing to put aside their differences when it comes to improvements in society (Twenge et al. 2012).

Besides such positive traits, some negative characteristics are also associated with millennials. Most prominently, in comparison to Generation X, they are considered selfish, self-absorbed, narcissistic, and lazy. They also behave differently in the labour market because they are less likely to remain in one job (Dimock 2019), one reason for this might also be that there is less economic certainty and temporary contracts have become more common. However, there is not enough data-driven research to prove that millennials are inherently more selfish, narcissistic, or greedy than other generations (Koczanski & Rosen 2019).

Some negative stereotyping stems from the tendency of every generation to criticise the new generation. Generational differences can also be cultural differences as the youngest members of a population are socialised in different circumstances and with different values. To better understand this generation and how they might affect and impact social change, it is thus crucial to examine millennials in diverse regions within their unique social, cultural, economic, and technological contexts (Twenge et al. 2012). Such investigations are particularly important in regions of the world with a large youth bulge. We have to ask to what extent these general characteristics, which are primarily based on studies from the geographical Global North, also hold true and fit to millennial generation in the geographical Global South.

In this FOCUS section we are therefore interested in drawing out general characteristics of a generation of people who have, so far, received little scholarly attention in Afghanistan and Pakistan because they are only now attaining decision-making positions. The term millennial is not used in Pashto and there is no direct translation for the word. The word *zwanan*/*zwanani* (young) is the closest general translation. Even though the term might not be used much among Pashtuns in Afghanistan and Pakistan, we adopted it because it connects this generation to millennials in other parts of the world who are often struggling with similar issues. Pashtun millennials are the first generation that is highly connected globally due to technological advancements, the availability of mobile phones and internet, mass migration and displacement, and travel. Moreover, it is the generation that consciously witnessed the terror attacks on 11 September 2001 and came of age during the initial years of the US-led War on Terror, which constituted a critical juncture in the Pashtun belt.

Since 2019, Pashtun millennials have come under the spotlight with the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), initiated by Manzoor Pashteen, an educated millennial himself, for the civil rights protection of Pashtuns in Pakistan. The PTM has been dubbed the 'movement of the Pashtun millennials' or 'Pashtun Spring' (Siddique 2019; Zaman 2019). This example shows that millennials are slowly taking over decision-making positions while older generations retire.[3] In patriarchal societies, seniority is a central feature of social relations and interactions. where very often elders take decisions that have to be respected and followed. This is why it is interesting to observe how this generational shift plays out and how the experiences of Pashtun millennials shape values, discourses, practices, structures and institutions in the future.

We consciously do not use the term youth which is often in use (Masquelier & Soares 2016; Siddique Seddon & Ahmad 2012), because

standard definitions of the term also encompass people in their late teens and early twenties. People in this age bracket have made very different experiences and they are still in junior positions, both socially and in the labour market. This is why we chose the term Millennials instead because it provides a slightly narrower focus.

In the absence of empirical research on Pashtun millennials, the papers in this FOCUS section examine millennials' contributions to society, literature, social movements, political engagement. They investigate how this generation deals with frustration towards the lack of state structures in the face of high population growth, low rates of employment, civil rights violations and generally few opportunities in the context of worsening economic conditions. Lastly, they seek to understand how millennials seek to conserve or challenge existing social structures and norms

Before delving into some of themes that emerged from the papers, we also have to acknowledge a number of limitations. Pashtun millennials are a heterogeneous group of people and the papers cannot cover this generation comprehensively. The papers focus on Pashtun millennials in Pakistan, one important blind spot therefore is the absence of papers from and about millennials in Afghanistan. One reason for this gap is that abstracts for the conference focused almost exclusively on the Pashtun areas in Pakistan. In addition, the political situation in Afghanistan has remained volatile and many scholars were focused on mere survival and were thus not able to travel. Second, the paper authors are primarily concerned with formally educated millennials. Third, they focus on persons who consider themselves to be Pashtun, since this is the theme of the FOCUS section. However, a number of religious, ethnic and linguistic minorities also live in the Pashtun regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan, however, their experiences are beyond the scope of the papers.

Based on the findings and arguments of the paper authors, we identified three themes that can characterise Pashtun millennials and that are worth further inquiry and examination: changed conceptions of what constitutes Pashtunwali, modification of decision-making procedures and lastly, a sense of connectedness to the broader world and concomitantly, a responsibility to self-improvement. These characteristics are not entirely new or unique to millennials, but they indicate shifts and transformations that are worth paying attention to.

Millennials included in the samples seemed to have a slightly different sense of responsibility towards the community than older generations. When it comes to important decisions and setting precedents with regard to norms and values and determining what counts as "tradition",

Generation X is still largely in charge. However, millennials represented in the samples of the papers demonstrated the propensity to not only think about how to effect change once they are in the driver seat, but to initiate change immediately. They prioritised the urgency for the need for transformation, fully aware that this approach might upset social hierarchies and raise potential conflicts.

Conceptions of Pashtunwali

The first theme we noticed was the way millennials related to Pashtunwali. Pashtunwali, also known as Pashtun *dastoor,* is a set of norms by which the Pashtuns live (Khan et al. 2019). It is not codified in written form but transmitted orally and through praxis. It is an important frame to represent Pashtuns but, as Abubakar Siddique notes, it has been subject to much misunderstanding over time:

> The Western writer is often guilty of reducing Pashtunwali to a handful of behaviours that serve to perpetuate a stereotype. […] Over the centuries, some Pashtun tribes have developed their own peculiar *narkh*, or set of customary laws based on the principles of Pashtunwali. Most often, these are unwritten codes that compensate for the lack, or inefficiency, of state institutions. In short, the best way to understand Pashtunwali is to understand that it incorporates many universal values, but is subject to local tradition. (Siddique 2014, 14-15)

Hence, there is no "one" Pashtunwali but rather multiple Pashtunwalis. Pashtuns living in different geographical regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan do not share an identical way of life. From the norms of *melmastya* (hospitality), *badal* (revenge), *nanawatay* (providing asylum), *tarboorwali* (agnatic rivalry), *siyali* (competition within an extended family), *nang* (honor), *namus* (chastity of women) to rules of engagement in *jirga* (council of elders), none of these notions hold homogenous meaning and value. Each generation imbues Pashtunwali with new meaning.

In the present context, Pashtunwali emerges as a conceptual blend rather than as a reformed version of the classical representation.[4] Most millennials, including men and women who are educated and exposed to the outside world through social media or other channels, seem to question older versions of Pashtunwali, especially its applicability in such changed socio-political and economic conditions. Notably, younger Pashtun generations seems to redefine their own roles in this social construct, including their responsibility to their families, notions of gender equality and the definition of masculinity and femininity or patriarchal domination of elder men. They are, however, generally not

challenging the existence of Pashtunwali as such. This stands in contrast to the perception many members of older generations seem to have that millennials are abandoning Pashtunwali altogether. Instead, Pashtun millennials seem to try to include notions of vulnerability and openness in communication, rather than dominance and strictness. For instance, Rahat Shah and Sayed Attaullah Shah show that many educated millennial men seek to change the definition of a "a real Pashtun man". They are also challenging dominant notions of gender segregation where women are limited to the *char diwari* (lit: four walls or the boundary wall of the house) and emphasise equality and mutual respect. However, to what extent millennials can translate these aspirations into praxis remains yet to be seen.

Roles and responsibilities in decision-making procedures

A second theme that emerges from the papers relates to the wish of millennials to modify traditional social institutions and decision-making procedures. *Spingari/masharan* (elderly men) enjoy a special status in Pashtun traditions. They take majority decisions and take the lead in setting norms and boundaries. They mediate in disputes and conflicts, and lead social institutions like jirga. It appears that millennials have started to challenge, at least in part, this hegemonic role of masharan by claiming agency in decision-making processes and by assuming roles and responsibilities which are traditionally solely attributed to elders. One such example is jirga.

Jirga or council of elders is a justice dispensation system—a hallmark of Pashtunwali. A jirga is usually summoned to resolve disputes and to deliberate on how to respond to internal and external threats and challenges (Siddique 2014, 14). In case of a dispute resolution, a jirga is usually called upon by aggrieved parties. The parties in conflict with each other surrender their *ikhtiyar* (authority/consent) to the jirga. After consultations with each party and isolated deliberations, the jirga announces its decision in the presence of both parties.

It appears that millennials have started to challenge not jirga as such but its rules of engagement and the traditional leadership role of (male) elders. Mateeullah Tareen shows that in the rural Pashtun regions of Balochistan, some young, male educated millennials have taken on the role of leading jirga for dispute resolution. Leading such a jirga is a role traditionally associated with elders. Seeing young millennials taking on roles that are generally exclusively reserved for male elders raised criticism and also opened up space for discussion, among the young and the old alike. Whereas, some young educated members of the society framed this change as a way for young men to actively contribute to the

wellbeing of their society, they did not see it as a challenge to traditional roles assigned to elders.

Millennials seek to modify the role of elders or the practice of social institutions like jirga, they do not seek to replace them. Rather, the critique is aimed at questioning past and present practices in an efforts to reform them.

Being in the world: Commitment to self-improvement

The third theme that emerged from the papers is the millennials' commitment to improve themselves. There are more than 60 million Pashtuns worldwide with the majority living across the Durand line between Pakistan (41 million) and Afghanistan (18 million).[5] As mentioned above, colonial frames of reference are still firmly in place and there is much written about the plight, miseries, and tribalism of Pashtuns while accounts of grounded research and original stories by and from Pashtuns has only recently started to emerge. The papers in this FOCUS section seek to bring forth the stories of Pashtun millennials' efforts to depart from established frames and narratives.

One component of such self-improvement is the high value millennials seem to place on formal education. They see education as a path to employment and as a means to actively participate in society. Another component is exposure to media, and other cultures. Through education and connections to other groups, communities and contexts millennials commit to improve themselves through introspection rather than blaming the outside world entirely for their problems. This sense of responsibility translates into actions for civic and political engagement. For instance, Mateeullah Tareen shows that educated Pashtun millennials in Balochistan form voluntary groups to assist in community affairs. After receiving education from urban centres in Pakistan, the young men come back to their villages with knowledge of managing community affairs and with motivation to imitate transformations in the societies they lived in. Hence, to render the t knowledge they gained relevant to their communities, they blend what they have learned with local norms and practices to improve the quality of life in their respective villages.

Similarly, Aisha Alam and Abida Bano point out that many professional Pashtun women have used their education to engage in activities that seek to improve the role and conditions of Pashtun women in society. Even if many of these women do not formally identify their activities as part of a women's movement, their actions contribute to transformations in how women are seen in Pashtun society and how they

can legitimately participate in community affairs. The authors also point out of that some forms of resistance are more obvious than others.

This is a point that Muhammad Ali Dinakhel and Neelam Farid develop further in their paper where they examine poems (*tappa, landay*) and songs (*sandara*) written by millennial Pashtun women who raise their voices for freedom, love, or empowerment. They also address socio-political issues such as conflict and the impact of war on society. The recital of such poetry has a broader audience because it can also reach those who are illiterate or do not have access to printed materials but have the means to access listening to music.

Rahat Shah and Sayed Attaullah Shah show many millennial men are outspoken about that fact that patriarchy does not only affect women but also men. They are acutely aware of dominant definitions and conventions of masculinity. They are often no longer comfortable with rigid prescriptions and expectations of dominance and instead try to replace with notions of mutual respect.

Thinking Ahead

The papers as well as existing literature demonstrate that there is a need to examine Pashtun Millennials further. Before we identify open questions that require our attention, we would like to elaborate on a major structural and institutional hurdle that scholars need to reckon with: the entanglement of visa regimes and funding frameworks. As we know from first-hand experience, in many universities in Europe the implementation of conferences and research projects has to follow institutional frameworks and time lines. Funding assurances are often given on relatively short notice, in contrast visa regimes require long term planning. When funding comes through only several months before a conference or workshop is supposed to take place, it is often impossible to invite scholars from Pakistan and Afghanistan to Europe because the visa application process is much longer than the funding time line.

As a consequence, only scholars who are already in possession of a long-term Schengen visa or who have foreign passports that allow visa-free entry to the EU can attend workshops and conferences. This creates new types of inequalities and frustration on all sides. This issue also extends to research. Historical sources on Afghanistan and Pakistan are scattered across various countries, access to these resources does not only depend on visas and passports but also the availability of funding and time to travel, resources that are only available to some. It is thus necessary to raise these issues continuously at all institutional levels in order to induce change.

Apart from these structural and institutional issues, there are a number of issues and questions that the papers were not able to address and that require further investigation. First, due to migration and displacement Pashtuns are scattered not only all over Pakistan but substantial diasporas live in the Gulf, Europe, Australia and North America. Hence, a broader geographical approach is necessary to capture their experiences too. Moreover, it remains to be seen how these migrants and diasporas negotiate their sense of belonging and how they affect social practices, values and identity constructions in the Pashtun "core areas" along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Here, it would be interesting to explore online spheres of connectivity and exchange. In the context of rapid travel and migration, an important question to ask is how Pashtun identity and sense of belonging will be constructed in the future. Is the connection to land and soil—a historical core region—which seems to be a constitutive part of Pashtun identity construction so far, going to be important in the future? How are traditional social institutions like Pashtunwali reframed and what is going to be considered "authentic"? How does Pashtun identity interact and blend with other identities, especially among those who do not live in the core regions? How are cleavages that seem to be opening up between urban and rural areas and between formally educated and those with no or informal education bridged and negotiated? What is the content of possible new frames of reference?

With this FOCUS section, we hope to open up space for discussion on social changes that are currently taking place in the Pashtun-majority regions of Pakistan and the role of millennials who are heavily involved in these processes. In this way, we contribute to emerging scholarship and activism that seek to break with established frames of reference and that aim to establish pluriversal perspectives (see Mignolo & Walsh 2018).

Endnotes

[1] We acknowledge that group identification terms such as nation, race or ethnicity are social constructs rather than ''natural'' categories. These categories become consequential because they appear to clearly define an in- and an out-group. Upon closer inspection, these characteristics are, however rather fluid and flexible because people and communities fill them with meaning. Hence, the definition of ethnicity and belonging is highly context dependent. Over the course of history, ethnicity has become an important rallying point and marker of identity in Pakistan, hence ethnicity becomes tangible through people and this is why we consider Pashtuns as an ethnic group, without, however, providing a straightjacket definition of "the Pashtuns". Generally, when people talk about Pashtuns as an ethnic group, a number of features to mind: shared language (Pashto), geography and shared territory, common ancestry (i.e. blood), shared history, shared values and cultural references, habits and conventions, clothing and appearance, and food.

[2] See Barkat Shah Kakar (2023) for a detailed list of such authors.

[3] Because decision-making powers is a central feature in our characterisation of Pashtun Millennials, we also included women in their late 30s to early 40s in this generation because in patriarchal societies, women tend to be older than men when they might hope to assume decision-making positions.

[4] We borrow the term conceptual blend from Carol Gluck's (2011) discussion about the process of becoming modern in nineteenth century Japan. According to Gluck a conceptual blend constitutes an outcome of improvisation and contestation that is 'neither new nor old […] And it was not a hybrid in the sense of combining existing practices or a synthesis in the Hegelian sense, either. The outcome (…) was in fact something *different* and something *new*.' Hence, 'by projecting aspects of two different components onto a separate mental space, the mind creates a new idea, a blend with an "emergent structure" that possesses characteristics present in neither of the two original components' (Gluck 2011, 685-86).

[5] These numbers are contested in the absence of a recent census in Afghanistan. Moreover, the number of Pashtun diaspora worldwide is also not known.

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