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A Critical Analysis of the Description of Pashtuns in Elphinstone’s Book “An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul”

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Abstract

This article presents a critical analysis of Mountstuart Elphinstone’s seminal work, An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul (1815), which is regarded as one of the earliest and most comprehensive colonial accounts of the Pashtuns, referred to as Afghans throughout the text. Elphinstone’s observations cover various aspects of Pashtun life, including the characteristics of different Pashtun tribes, their language and literature, folklore, and the sociocultural practices that define Pashtunwali, such as hospitality, shelter, and the code of revenge. His detailed descriptions extend to the customs surrounding Pashtun betrothal and marriage, birth and funeral ceremonies, and the traditional attire of Pashtun men and women, with a particular focus on the socioeconomic conditions of Pashtun women during the early 19th century. However, Elphinstone’s portrayal is deeply embedded within the frameworks of colonialism and orientalism, raising critical questions about the accuracy and objectivity of his depictions. This article argues that while Elphinstone’s account provides valuable insights into Pashtun culture, it is often marred by biases, stereotypes, and the colonial agenda of his time. By critically examining his descriptions, this study seeks to uncover the complexities of Pashtun identity as depicted in colonial literature and calls for a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of Pashtun history. In doing so, it emphasizes the need for contemporary scholars to engage with diverse perspectives to challenge prevailing narratives and contribute to a more accurate representation of Pashtun heritage.

Key Words: Afghans, Pashtuns, Pashtunwali, Hospitality, Revenge, Elphinstone

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BACKGROUND

Napoleon's invasion of Egypt 1798 triggered Lord Minto, the Governor General of the British East India Company. For securing mutual defense treaties in the event of an overland French invasion of India, three missions, to Persia, Kabul, and Punjab, were sent. Charles Metcalfe was sent to Punjab and John Malcolm was sent to Persia. Elphinstone's diplomatic and scientific caravan was sent to the Kingdom of Kabul. Elphinstone was sent to encourage the Pashtuns (Afghans) to resist the French. Shah Shuja wanted aid against the domestic enemies but Elphinstone did not agree to his request. Elphinstone and Shah Shuja, the then king of Afghanistan, signed a treaty the very day the mission departed from Peshawar, April 14, 1809.

The treaty was ratified by Lord Minto on June 14, 1809, but by then it was a dead letter because Shuja's power in Afghanistan had collapsed (Aitchison, 1983: 233-35). Shah Zaman, Mahmud, and Shah Shuja were all half-brothers. They were sons of Timur Shah (r 1773-1793) who was the son and successor of Ahmad Shah (r 1747-1773). The principal outcome of Elphinstone's mission was the collection of information about Pashtuns and Afghanistan, mainly from Afghan informants because Elphinstone never went farther than Peshawar, then part of the Durrani Empire. In Elphinstone's book, he has described the origin, race, and history of Afghans, their government, social division, rituals of marriage and death, women's conditions, education, language, literature, religion, national groups, superstitions, hospitality, habits of robbery, traditions, and character.

THE AUTHOR

Mountstuart Elphinstone was born in 1779 in Dunbartonshire, England. He studied at the Royal High School in Edinburgh. Elphinstone and his brother started working in the East India Company, and in return for his services, he was made a representative (resident) of Nagpur. Elphinstone belonged to the first generation of colonial administrators in India. Here he studied Sanskrit and Persian languages. During this period, he also traveled to Persia and was very impressed by Persian poetry. Elphinstone worked in India for 31 years from 1796 to 1827 and retired as the Governor of Bombay. He was also offered to become the Governor General of India but he refused. After retirement, he went back to his homeland and spent the rest of his life in the countryside of his country. He

died in 1859 at the age of eighty. He was the first British diplomat who was sent to Afghanistan on an official diplomatic trip. He also wrote two other books: *Minutes on Education* (1824), and *History of India: The Hindu and Mohamedan Periods* (1841), but the factor for his recognition in academic and diplomatic circles is his book about Afghanistan known as "An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul". Through this book, he established his reputation as a keen observer of Pashtun society.

THE BOOK

Elphinstone's famous book about Pashtuns titled "An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul, and its dependencies, Persia, Tartary, and India" commonly known as "An Account of the Kingdom of Kabul" was published in 1815. This is called the Bible of Afghan Studies (Munn, 1934, Caroe, 1971, Hanifi, 2019). This book is based on the report of a diplomatic mission to Afghanistan. Portions of this report were published in 1815 in a book form that was twice reprinted in 1839 and 1842 for military and public reference in the context of the first Anglo-Afghan war. During this mission, he visited only the eastern parts of Afghanistan. He collected more information about Afghanistan from February to June 1809 in Peshawar, and then he got some information from reading other books and from the people. He spent five years in Puna on the compilation of these materials and finally published the first edition of this book in London in 1815. The second edition was published in 1819. The third edition was published in 1839 and the fourth edition was published in 1842. The fifth edition was published in 1972 with an introduction by Olaf Cairo. The latest version was published from Gosh-e-Adab, Jinnah Road, Quetta in 1992 comprising two volumes. This book has received less scholarly attention and investigation. Its anthropological aspect is very significant. The book is the first substantive British Indian publication dedicated to Afghanistan and remains the most important English language text about Afghanistan.

AFGHANS/PASHTUNS

Elphinstone has used the term Afghans for Pashtuns. Some people think that the term Afghan became an umbrella term for the different ethnic groups living in the Durrani kingdom known as Afghanistan. Bactrian documents made the oldest attestation of "Afghan" viz late 4th century (Sims-Williams, 2002: 225-242).

Elphinstone, in his book, provided descriptions of various ethnic groups inhabiting Afghanistan, including the Pashtuns. His descriptions typically reflected the perspectives and biases that are generally found in British colonial-era writers. Colonial literature is influenced by the colonial process of colonization (Dinakhel et al, 2022). Elphinstone described the Pashtuns as a rugged and martial people, known for their fierce independence and warrior culture. He often emphasized their bravery, loyalty to their tribes, and their ability to resist foreign invaders. However, it's important to note that Elphinstone's portrayal may contain elements of colonialism and orientalism, a Western perspective that often exoticizes and stereotypes non-Western cultures. Colonialism is the subjugation by the physical and psychological force of one culture by another (McMichael, 2004: 4). He also differentiated western and eastern Afghans/Pashtuns in terms of dialects and culture. The latter is known as Pathans. Pathans were sub-divided into two groups one living in the highland and the other in Peshawar and its countryside. Elphinstone's familiarity was confined to southeastern Afghanistan.

COLLECTION OF INFORMATION ABOUT PASHTUNS BY ELPHINSTON

During the mission Elphinstone and other members of the mission used to collect information about different characteristics of Pashtuns. When they were crossing the Indus River, a Sikh merchant met them in the boat, he told them that the Pashtuns are very kind to travelers, but the Wazir tribe among them is harsh and eats human flesh (Elphinstone, 1990: 38). He had obtained some of the information about Pashtun history, genealogy, traditions, society, geography and administration during his stay with the Pashtuns, and others obtained from previously written sources such as travelogues and books written in European and Persian languages. Later he got some information from those people who were aware of this region and its residents. Among already available books he used include Aien-e-Akbari, Babur Nama, Malfuzat-e-Timuri, Tuzak-e-Timuri, Tarikhnama-e-Hirat, Tarikh-e-Farishta, works of Ibn Hawqal and Krushansky, Burhan-e-Qate, Farhang-e-Ibrahim Shahi, Tarikh-e-Murasa and some works of Khushal Khan Khattak. When this mission was going back, he took the mullahs, parathas, and other professionals with himself to Calcutta, and later he got some information from them. When the mission was in Peshawar, Elphinstone used to

invite the mullahs and himself to participate in their invitations in Peshawar and get information this way. Elphinstone submitted a report of this mission to the government and later wrote and published this book. Elphinstone received ethnographic information through Persian linguistic filters. He also collected some of the information from Pashtun soldiers serving with East India Company. Although they lived in Rohiland they were visiting their aboriginal Pashtun areas (Bayly, 1996: 322).

PASHTUN TRIBES

When the Elphinstone mission entered the Pashtun areas, he mentioned Pashtun sub-tribes they met with them in different areas. In Dera Ismail Khan, he mentioned the tribes of Miankhel, Shirani, and Sulaiman Khel (Elphinstone, 1990: 34). The first book of the second volume consists of six chapters. In the first chapter, there is a special description of Pashtun tribes. In this chapter, the eastern tribes of Pashtuns (Yusafzai and Turkalani) are described. In the second chapter, Marwat, Gandapur, DaulatKhel, Miankhel, and Sturiani are mentioned. In the third chapter, he described the Zmari, Shiranis, and Wazirs of the eastern tribes. In the fourth chapter, he mentioned the Durani, Barakzi, Achakzi, and Tarin tribes. In the fifth chapter, he also described the Ghalzis, Wardag, and Kakar tribes. In the sixth chapter, he mentioned Nasir. Elphinstone claims that the Afghan tribe of Marwat is known for its robbery, having stolen some of King's horses and camels (Elphinstone, 1972, p.46-47).

Elphinstone's method of characterizing Pashtuns (Afghans) through samples raises interesting and dubious questions about his study. He describes the characteristics of the "Eastern tribes—the Berdooraunees," and among them, the "Eusofzyes," who "display many of the peculiarities of their nation in more perfection than any other tribe," for example, writing that he was describing "all of the manner and characters of Afghans." As such, Elphinstone goes on, "We find the Berdooraunees active, industrious, and acute, but selfish, contentious, and dishonest; brave, but quarrelsome." Compared to other Afghans, they exhibit greater bigotry and intolerance, and they are more influenced by their Mullahs. They are also more depraved and nasty, and some of them are the worst Afghans. After Elphinstone publicized *An Account of the Kingdom of Kabul*, the colonial power of ink perpetuated these contrasting perceptions of Afghans as

"brave, but quarrelsome; active, industrious, and acute, but selfish, contentious, and dishonest." These perceptions persisted in the minds of both foreigners and Afghans (Elphinstone, 1972, volume II, p.3).

PASHTUNS' REGIONS

Like the description of many Pashtun sub-tribes, he also described various regions of Pashtuns in his book such as on the way from Dera Ismail Khan to Peshawar, he mentioned Paharpur, Panyala and Marwat. He also described the Kurram River, the area of Chashma, and the Barak tribe. From Kohat to Dara Adam Khel, he mentioned Badaber and finally described Peshawar where the mission arrived on February 25, 1809 (Elphinstone, 1990: 58). the Pashto language is divided into various dialects based on regional and ethnic factors (Dinakhel, 2020).

The people of Peshawar belong to the Indian race, but they speak both Pashto and Hindi languages. The population of Peshawar is one lac. There are three-storied houses made of bricks and wood and there are shops in the lower part. The streets of Peshawar are narrow. Vegetables, fruits, and butter are sold on the streets. He keeps the water in the musk (leather bag). There is a difference in the dress of Persians, Uzbeks, Pashtuns, and Hindus living in Peshawar. The people of Peshawar are very civilized (Elphinstone, 1990: 72-74).

PASHTUN FOLKLORE

Folklore has an impact on ethnic identity which is also visible in Pashto folklore (Dinakhel, 2029). Elphinstone closely observed Pashtun culture and Pashtun folklore. He analyzed Pashto folk songs and Pashto folk tales. According to Elphinstone, the majority of Afghan songs and stories deal with love, and they typically express that emotion in the most luscious and beautiful way. About the romantic folk tale of Adam Khan and Durkhanai, he states that most males in the country know a favorite poetry that narrates the tale of Adam Khan and Durkhanai. According to him, this story is recited, sung, and read aloud throughout the nation. Durkhanai was the most attractive and kind of the virgins and Adam was the bravest and most attractive young man in his tribe; nevertheless, a long-standing family dispute kept them apart (Elphinstone, 1972, p. 244-245).

PASHTUN WOMEN

Pashtun (Afghan) society in the early 19th century is thoroughly examined in Mountstuart Elphinstone's "An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul" (1815), with special attention paid to the role and representation of Pashtun women. Elphinstone observed that the situations of women vary depending on their social standing. Social representation of women can be better understood from the Pashto proverbs related to women (Farid, 2023). The upper classes enjoy all the pleasures and luxuries that their circumstances provide, but they remain completely hidden. The impoverished take care of the house, bring in water, etc. According to Muhammeden law, a husband is permitted to beat his wife, although it is considered dishonorable for a male to use this legal right. Elphinstone provides more information, stating that women in the upper class usually pick up reading skills and that some have exceptional literary abilities. However, writing is viewed as immodest since a woman can use her skill to communicate with a romantic partner (Elphinstone, 1972, p. 241). The Pashtuns(Afghans) purchase their wives (Elphinstone, 1990: 236). Wealthy people had more than the permitted four wives, in addition to keeping a large number of female slaves (Elphinstone, 1990: 241).

CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS OF PASHTUNS

Elphinstone provides insight into the customs and traditions of the Afghan people. He observed that hospitality was highly valued by Afghans. The Afghans are considered to be one of the most hospitable people in the world. An Afghan, how poor, feels delighted and honored to receive a guest (Ali, 1969:30). They treat their guests with great respect. He also mentions the practice of "Badal" a form of blood vengeance common in Afghan society as well as reciprocal cooperation. He has dedicated Chapter VI of Book II to the hospitality of Pashtuns. He demonstrates a deep knowledge of the local customs and traditions, including the hospitality. According to Elphinstone Afghans/Pashtuns treat their guests with great respect and generosity. He notes that when a traveler arrives at an Afghan village, he is warmly welcomed and provided with food, shelter, and any other necessities he may require (Elphinstone, 1972, p. 295). According to Elphinstone, this hospitality is extended even to enemies, as the Afghans believe

that once a guest enters their home, he is under their protection and must be treated as an honored guest (Elphinstone, 1972, P.296).

An oral tradition known as Pashtunwali governs the manner of life of the (Pashtun)Afghan people to a great degree (Elphinstone, 1972, p.326). The Pashtuns have Pashtunwali as their customary law for many years. They have long considered this unwritten code of conduct to be sacred. In actuality, Syed Abdul Qudus claims that this code of honor encompasses all activities from birth to death and contains values of life. The Pashtun society's socioeconomic circumstances are the source of the code of Pashtunwali's strength. The foundational ideas of the code are egalitarianism, fraternity, equity and justice, and equality. Pashtunwali law is based on a combination of precedent, custom, and tradition; much like English common law (Bangash, 2016, p. 13).To elaborate, Pashtunwali is a set of beliefs and principles. These precepts establish normative behaviors for leading a Pashtun lifestyle and define how the tribe interacts (Bangash, 2016, p.14).

MANNER AND CHARACTER OF PASHTUNS

While the Pashtun(Afghan) way of life is not consistent across the nation, Mountstuart Elphinstone notes in his book *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul* that he refers to the comprehensive account of the tribes for information on variations. The division of the country into people who live in houses and tents is one major factor contributing to diversity. The majority of people who live in tents are located in the West, where they likely make up half of the population; however, people in the East live in houses.

He considered the possibility that fewer people were residing in tents. It is undeniable that there have been significant emigrations of tribes that are agricultural, but the ease with which they have relocated in the past seems to support the theory that the majority of them were shepherds and lived in tents (Elphinstone, 1972, p. 302). According to Elphinstone, the Afghans were the ones who most favored the pastoral lifestyle. Men enter it with pleasure and regret leaving it behind. There are plenty of benefits to living on a farm. It is simple, carefree, and safe; it provides plenty without requiring a lot of labor, combines the benefits of different climates, and offers a reprieve from the boredom of inactivity through regular scene changes and the endless resources of

field sports (Elphinstone, 1972, p. 304).

Elphinstone characterizes Pashtuns (Afghans) as gregarious individuals. Assalaum o Alaikoom, or "Peace be unto you," is how a guest greets the group as they arrive. To this, they reply, "And unto thee be peace." Then, the home's owner gets up and says, "ShaRaghle, HarkalaRashe," taking the stranger's hand in his own. It indicates "You are welcome, and please return often." In response, the stranger says, "ShupuKheiree," or "May you prosper." In addition to the lavish celebrations held for marriages and other special events, they frequently host dinner parties for five or six people, depending on how often they can afford to butcher a sheep (Elphinstone, 1972, p. 307-308).

As dinner is being served, the host makes recommendations for his dishes, encourages everyone to eat, and warns them not to leave any food unfinished. Both before and after supper, they say grace, and after everything is over, the guests bless the host. They gather in a circle to sing and tell stories, or they sit and smoke after supper. Great tale-tellers are the old men. They tell stories of ministers and monarchs, but mostly of love and conflict (Elphinstone, 1972, p. 310). Aside from singing, some males perform odes or other poetry excerpts; yet others play the flute or rabab, which is similar to a lute or guitar. The chase, which is done in different ways depending on the terrain of the nation, is the favorite pastime of all Afghans. While hunting is a highly popular pastime throughout the whole kingdom, Elphinstone notes in his book *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul* that the Western Afghans are the ones that hunt the most (Elphinstone, 1972, p. 311).

According to Elphinstone, their serious demeanor and lengthy beards hardly make sense with the majority of their games, which seem somewhat juvenile to us. Men of adulthood play marbles. *Khossye*, or *Cubuddee* to the Dooranees and Taujiks, is a game that is played frequently. All games are played for a stake, although the usual stake is dinner, sometimes the bet is money, and other times the winner takes home the beaten cock, ram, or camel (Elphinstone, 1972, p. 312). Some of the flaws were also perceived by Elphinstone in Afghan's character such as tendencies towards avarice envy and revenge and discord (Tanner, 2002: 134). Pashtuns do not like to be subordinate or employee of a government because it is considered losing their liberty and freedom. All Pashtuns are

considered equal and no one is ready to accept one as superior to himself. This fact is evident from the following reply of an Afghan when he was asked by Elphinstone regarding the need for a strong king and ruler.

"We are content with discord, we are content with alarms, we are content with blood, but we will never be content with a master (Elphinstone, 1990: 231)."

PASHTUN BETROTHAL AND MARRIAGES

Elphinstone has devoted Chapter III of his narrative to the topic of marriage and women's status. As to his statement, the Pashtuns (Afghans) buy their brides. The Muhammadan law recognizes this practice, which is prevalent throughout most of Asia. The cost differs amongst Pashtuns (Afghans) based on the bridegroom's circumstances. Despite receiving good treatment overall, the practice has the consequence of making women feel somewhat like property. A wife can file for divorce before the Qazi on the grounds of good reason, but even this rarely happens. A husband can file for divorce without giving a reason.

In Afghanistan, the average age for a male to get married is twenty, while for a woman, it is fifteen or sixteen. Men who cannot afford to pay for a bride frequently remain single until they are forty, while women may remain single until they are twenty-five. However, wealthy people may get married before they reach puberty; town residents also get married young; and eastern Afghans marry boys at the age of fifteen to girls at the age of twelve, or even younger if they can afford it (Elphinstone, 1972, p.236-237).

BIRTH AND FUNERAL CEREMONIES OF PASHTUNS

Afghan funerals are the same as those of other Muhammadans: a sick man repeats his creed and the appropriate prayers in his final moments before passing away with his face facing Mecca and declaring that Muhammad is God's prophet and that there is no other god. The Mullah encourages the man to repent of his sins. Elphinstone hasn't discussed the birth much other than mentioning that the circumcision rite is the same in all Muhammadan nations. There is much celebration and feasting involved (Elphinstone, 1972, p.246).

DRESSES OF PASHTUNS

The males wear different clothes, but according to Elphinstone, the Western style is what the country originally wore. It is made up of two loose trousers of dark-colored cotton; a huge shirt that is somewhat below the knee and has larger

sleeves similar to a waggoner dress; and a low cap with gold brocade on top and black silk or satin on the sides.

On the other hand, ladies wear shirts that are similar to men's but significantly longer. It is composed of higher-quality fabrics and is typically colored or embroidered with silk flowers; in the West, it is frequently constructed completely of silk. They have a small silk cap that is embroidered with gold thread and barely reaches the forehead or ears. They also wear colored trousers that are tighter than those worn by men. Finally, they have a large sheet that is either printed or plain that they throw over their heads to cover their faces when someone approaches (Elphinstone, 1972, p.312-313).

CONCLUSION

In examining Mountstuart Elphinstone's *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul*, it is essential to understand the historical and personal contexts in which this work was produced. Elphinstone's journey to Afghan lands was motivated by the British Empire's strategic interests in the region, and his observations were heavily influenced by the geopolitical dynamics of the early 19th century. His background as a British diplomat and colonial administrator shaped his perspective, and these influences are evident in his portrayal of the Pashtuns, whom he consistently referred to as Afghans.

Elphinstone's work, first published in 1815, has undergone multiple editions, each reinforcing its position as a foundational text in the study of Afghan history and culture. However, a critical analysis reveals that much of the information presented was derived from informants in Peshawar during his stay and previous writings. The book has many limitations but despite these limitations, Elphinstone provided detailed accounts of various aspects of Pashtun life, including tribal structures, regional variations, folklore, and the customs and traditions that define Pashtunwali. He also offered insights into the social conditions of Pashtun women, marriage practices, and ceremonies associated with birth and death.

Yet, it is important to acknowledge that Elphinstone's portrayal of the Pashtuns is deeply intertwined with the colonial lens through which he viewed his subjects. His descriptions often reflect the biases and stereotypes of his time, leading to a depiction of Pashtun society that, while informative, is not without its

distortions. The reliance on second-hand information and using linguistic filters further complicates the authenticity of his account.

In conclusion, while *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul* remains a significant historical document, it must be approached with a critical eye. Elphinstone’s work offers valuable insights into Pashtun culture, but these insights are framed within a context of colonial power dynamics and should be read with an understanding of their inherent limitations. Contemporary scholars must strive to go beyond Elphinstone’s narrative by incorporating diverse perspectives and primary sources that provide a more nuanced and accurate portrayal of Pashtun’s identity, history, and culture. By doing so, we can better appreciate the complexities of Pashtun society and challenge the colonial narratives that have long shaped our understanding of this region.

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