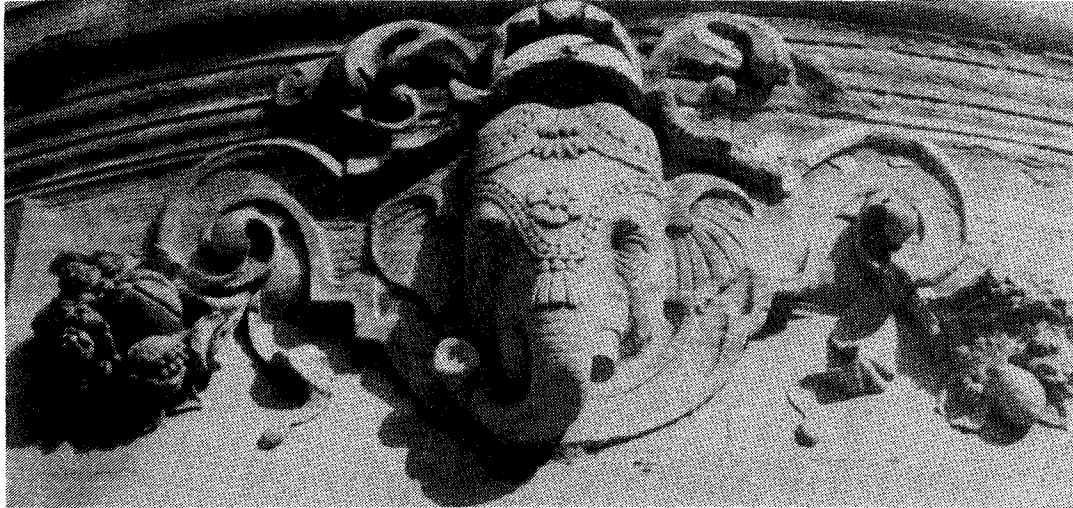


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AFGHANISTAN AND EMPIRE
A Historic Overview

by **Carol Rose**

There is no more ironically appropriate place to begin an adventure to South-Central Asia than here in the birthplace of the British Raj.

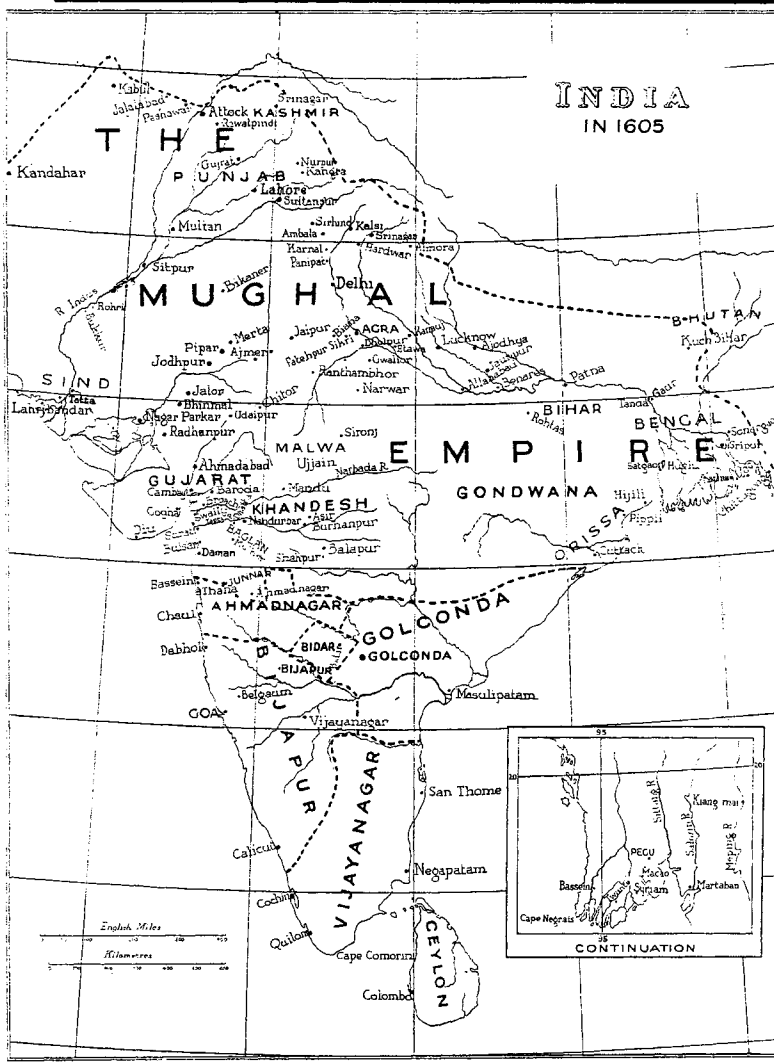
Britain for decades trained its finest young scholars to conquer the world from behind the great stone parapets of Oxford University. The spirit of Empire lingers on in the cloisters and galleries still adorned with crests of ancient Kings. Although locals now refer to the "dreaming spires" of Oxford as monuments to the Englishman's "perspiring dreams," only the most cynical are blind to the power and wealth of colonial Britain emanating from the elaborate stained glass of New College Chapel or the great domes and towers of Sir Christopher Wren.

Wandering the well-groomed gardens or watching swans from the grassy banks of the River Thames, it is easy to imagine the young British adventurers who dreamed of travelling to the untamed frontier of Britain's empire in Asia: Afghanistan.

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Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

MAP 1: THE MOGUL EMPIRE, 1605



the land around those mountains or the people who live there.

The name Hindu Kush -- or Hindu Killer -- was used first by the Persian writer Ibn Batuta, who crossed the western Himalayas near Kabul in A.D. 1334 on his way to India. Batuta wrote that the name Hindu Kush derives from the fact that "So many of the slaves, male and female, brought from India die on the passage of this mountain owing to the severe cold and quantity of snow."¹

In 1504, a century before the arrival of the first Briton, a Central Asian named Zahir-ud-din Muhammad Babur captured the city of Kabul at the base of the Hindu Kush. Babur, a descendent of Timur and Chinghiz Khan, went on to seize Delhi in 1526, establishing the great Mogul Empire that for two centuries ruled over 150 million people in an area that today

EMERGENCE OF AN EMPIRE

Between the steppes of Central Asia and the steamy plains of Pakistan and India rise the massive snow-capped peaks of the Hindu Kush. Aristotle called them the greatest mountains of the East; Alexander the Great founded a city in their shadow. And while countless men have tried, none has tamed

embraces Afghanistan, Pakistan and India.

Although Babur never returned to Kabul, writes the historian W.K. Fraser-Tytler, "Like others who have for a period made it their home, his devotion to Kabul remained constant throughout the remainder of his life and amid scenes of conquest and of grandeur which might well have

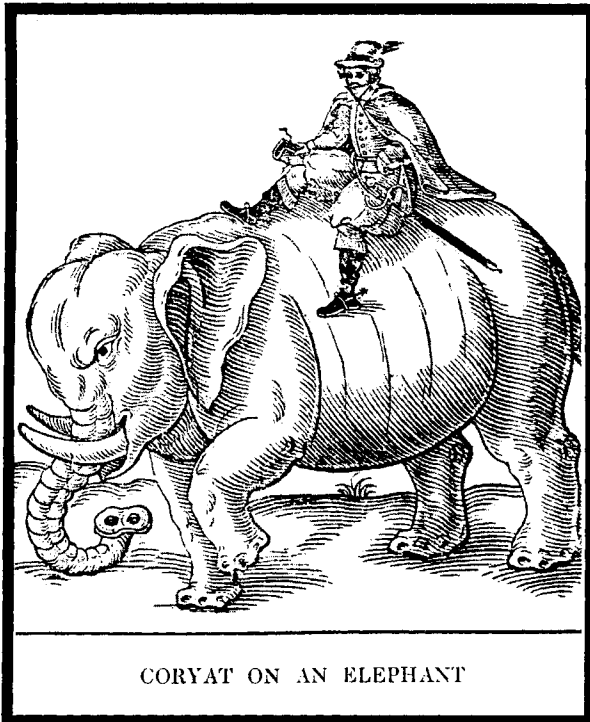


Figure 2: Contemporary British images of South Asia were often fanciful. Here Tom Coryat, an East India Company merchant in the 1600s, is shown wearing spurs as he perches side-saddle on an elephant.

obliterated its rugged beauty from his mind. His memoirs show how often his thoughts reverted to his highland capital to which after his conquest of northern India he was never able to return, but where he was finally laid to rest under the great chenar trees of the Bagh-i-Babur."²

The first Britons in India were merchants for the British East India Company, lured to Asia in 1600 by the promise of spices, silks and precious stones. Among the first to pen a description of the Afghans was Edward Terry, who served as chaplain to Sir Thomas Roe on the third voyage of the British East India Company in 1616:

"The learned tongues are Persian and Arabian, which they write backward, as the Hebrewes, to the left. There is little learning among them; a reason whereof may be their penury of bookes, which are but few, and their manuscripts. But doubtlesse they are men of strong capacities, and, were there literature among them, would be the authors of many excellent workes.

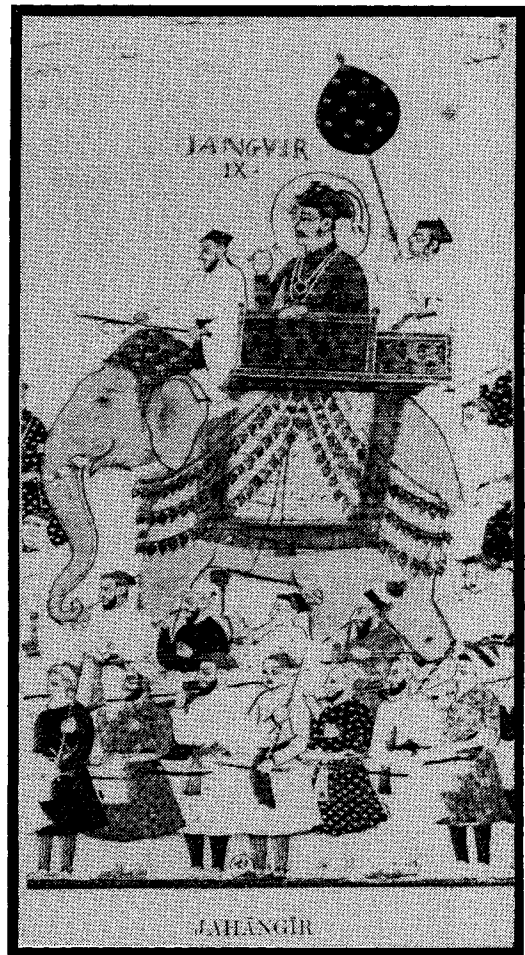


Figure 1: Miniature painting flourished under the Mogul Emperor Jahangir, who ruled from 1569 - 1627.

Caubul, in which he wrote the following:

"An English traveller from India would view [Afghans] with a more favourable eye. He would be pleased with the cold climate, elevated by the wild and novel scenery, and delighted by meeting many of the productions of his native land. He would first be struck with the thinness of the fixed population, and then with the appearance of the people; not fluttering in white muslins, while half their bodies are naked, but soberly and decently attired in dark-coloured woollen clothes, and wrapped up in brown mantles, or in large sheep-skin cloaks. He would admire their strong and active forms, their fair complexions and European features, their industry and enterprise, the hospitality, sobriety, and contempt of pleasure which appear in all their habits; and, character."⁴

FEARLESS WARRIORS

Elphinstone, and most western scribes after him, based their observations on the eastern tribes of Afghanistan with whom they first came into contact. These were the fiercely independent mountain people known as the "Pushtuns" or "Pathans." Indeed, the name "Afghanistan" itself stems from the Persian word

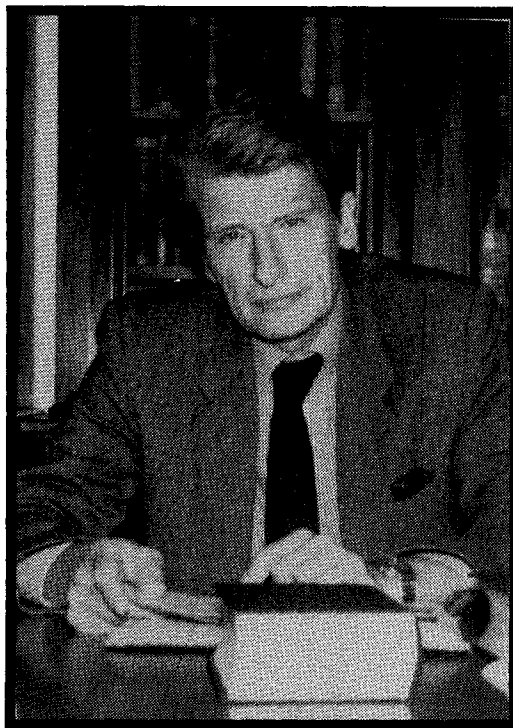


Figure 4: The Afghans were "great chaps to have on your side in a fight," says Oxford scholar Schuyler Jones.

"Afghan," meaning "Pashtun-speaker." Thus the name "Afghan" technically refers to a select group of tribes, and may be resented by the more than 30 non-Pushtun ethnic groups of present-day Afghanistan.

The western stereotype of the Pushtun is familiar: the bearded warrior crouched behind a rock, his rifle raised. Fraser-Tytler, who served the British crown in India from 1910 until 1941, expounded on the warlike image of the Pushtun:

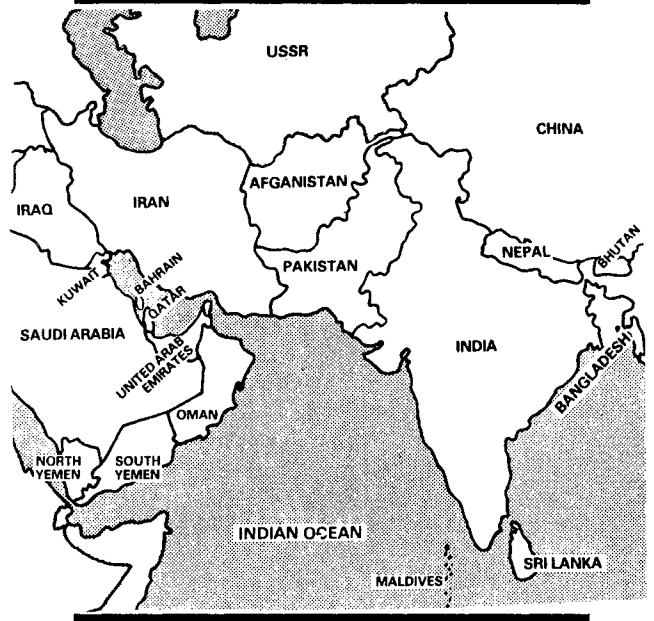
"The true Afghans had never been looked on as other than savage wild men of the hills by their neighbours until they

suddenly emerged 200 years ago as sovereigns of a vast dominion ... Contact with the world brings out in the Pathan a latent spark of administrative genius and power of rulership. But those who have remained sheltering in the great tangle of hills which lie between the Hindu Kush and the Indus, untouched by the civilizing influences of their more cultured neighbours, demand from the world nothing save to live in freedom, to fight among themselves, and to prey upon their neighbours as they have

MAP 2: RUSSIAN - BRITISH ADVANCES TO AFGHANISTAN OVER THREE CENTURIES



MAP 3: SOUTH-CENTRAL ASIA in 1990



always done."⁵

"The British view of Afghanistan always has been colored by the view of the Pathans, and [by] Kipling's verse, in which they were depicted as fearless, strong and crafty," says Schuyler "Skye" Jones, head of the Department of Ethnology and Prehistory at Oxford University, and curator of the Pitt Rivers Museum.

"They were brave fighters and fiercely independent, which were qualities the British greatly admired," Schuyler adds. "Although they gave the British a lot of trouble, they were great chaps to have on your side in a fight."

THE LOSING BATTLE

Romantic images of the Afghan-Pushtun warrior were magnified by the fact that Britain failed three times -- in 1839, 1878 and 1919 -- to extend its military hegemony over Afghanistan. Then, as now, foreign invaders with superior fire-power found Afghanistan easier to invade than it was to conquer.

One prophetic story is told of how the British Resident in Baluchistan told the Khan of Kalat in 1838 that the "British army has entered

Kabul without firing a shot."

The old Khan replied, "Yes...You people have entered this country, but how will you get out?"⁶

No doubt, similar questions could be put to the Soviet Union today. It took Britain four years, \$32 million, and 20,000 British lives to extricate itself from Kabul after the 1839 invasion.

Soon thereafter, Britain adopted a policy of administration on the Afghan border known as the "Sandeman System." It was named after



Figure 5: Western stereotypes often picture the Afghan as a bearded warrior crouched behind a rock with a rifle, as in this 19th Century engraving, entitled "Afghans Professionally Employed".



Figure 6: Dost Mohammed Khan, the Afghan Amir who signed a peace treaty with Britain in the mid-19th Century.

the British administrator Robert Sandeman, who asserted that the only way to deal with Afghans was to turn "the wild tribesmen from enemies into friends."⁷ His system was simple: Britain paid tribal leaders enough money to maintain their own cadres of

armed men. In exchange, the Afghans agreed to guard trade routes and carry out the policies of the tribal Jirgas, or congresses.⁸

In 1855 and again 1858, Dost Mohammed Khan, who was the Amir -- or governor -- of Kabul, signed friendship treaties with the British formalizing England's occupation of the Punjab in present-day Pakistan. Those treaties laid the basis for the British territorial unit known as the "North West Frontier Province," a name still used in Pakistan today.

Meantime, London was beginning to worry about another threat to its Empire in South Asia. This time the menace came not from unruly Afghan tribes, but from the imperial armies of Czarist Russia.

EMPIRES IN COLLISION

As Britain battled to extend its control over the eastern border of Afghanistan, in the mid-1800s Russia was advancing from its southern border toward Kabul and Herat. [See Map 2]

One by one, the Russian army swallowed the northern princely states of Afghanistan, which St.

Petersburg then referred to as "Khorasan" or the Kingdom of Kabul. The Czar's forces seemed to pause only long enough to digest one tribal kingdom before marching on to the next. Tashkent and Samargand fell in 1874, Khoqand a year later, and so on, with each new conquest generating alarm among the rulers of British India.

"Whether we like it or not," wrote the **Saturday Review** in 1868, "this country [England] must face the alternative of advancing the North-West frontier of India, or leaving it open to Russia at her discretion and convenience, to seize Herat."⁹

Ten years later, the British Prime Minister issued an ultimatum demanding a permanent diplomatic and military presence at Kabul as a deterrent to Russian intervention. Instead, Amir Sher Ali of Afghanistan invited a Russian mission to Kabul to discuss the British interference.

Britain countered by mounting a 35,000-troop invasion of Afghanistan through the Khyber and Bolan passes. But after capturing the border areas, the British were bogged down outside of Kabul.¹⁰ Meantime, Amir Sher Ali set off for St. Petersburg with plans to convene an international conference to protest the British invasion. Along the way, however, the Amir fell ill and died. And once again, Britain put a Pushtun ruler on the Afghan

throne to act as their client and provide a face-saving retreat from military defeat. That man was Amir Abdul Rahman.

One of the most ruthless leaders of Afghanistan, Abdul Rahman persecuted the smaller tribes and nationalities of Afghanistan throughout his 17-year reign. He reportedly



Figure 7: Alexander Burnes, a young Scotsman who warned Britain not to attack Afghanistan in 1839. To no avail: Four years later England retreated with heavy losses.

took great pleasure in publicly torturing his enemies, throwing them into wells or starving them to death. When he died, more than 10 percent of the population of Kabul was in prison.¹¹

Nonetheless, the Amir was Britain's man in Afghanistan. And in 1893, Amir Abdul Rahman and Britain signed the Durand treaty establishing the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan that exists to this day. Two years later, the Anglo-Russian Pamir boundary Commission agreed upon a demarcation of the wild mountainous region of northern Afghanistan, adding a poetic note to their final report:

"Here, amidst a solitary wilderness 20,000 feet above sea level, absolutely inaccessible to man and within the ken of no living creatures except the Pamir eagles, the three great Empires actually meet. No more fitting trijunction could possibly be found."¹²

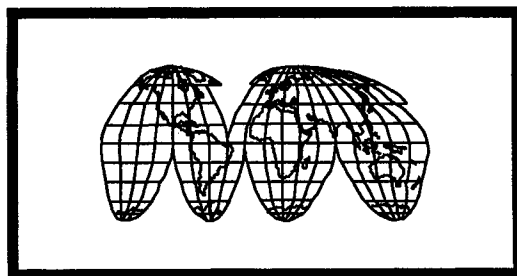
Once the Anglo-Russian boundary was agreed upon, the Afghan amirs enjoyed two relatively peaceful decades living on generous stipends from the British government. The common people of Afghanistan, meantime, lived off the land according to ancient tribal traditions.

Then in April 1919, Abdul Rahman's son, Amir Habibullah Khan, declared Afghanistan an independent nation. Britain,

fearing the cry for independence would spread to India, ordered 750,000 troops into Afghanistan. Despite a 15:1 troop advantage, and an arsenal of advanced mortars, tanks and aircraft, the British army was pinned down outside of Kabul by hundreds of Afghan guerrilla attacks. It soon became clear that Britain would be defeated in Afghanistan for a third and final time.

A cease-fire was declared after one month. When the negotiations ended in 1923, Britain had agreed to recognize Afghanistan as a sovereign nation. Twenty-five years later, the British Empire in India collapsed.

Formal statehood afforded Afghanistan only a temporary respite from foreign intervention. The Soviet invasion just over a decade ago has forced the people of the Hindu Kush to fight once more against domination by a distant European power. Thus in the future, as in the past, the struggle for peace and self-determination continues for the people of Afghanistan.



James Lewis was an Englishman who deserted from the Bengali European rifle brigade in 1826, embarking on a life of travel in Afghanistan. Posing as an American named Charles Masson, he wrote many books on Afghan culture, art and coins. He also wrote a book in 1831 entitled, Legends of the Afghan countries, in which he included the following bit of poetic propaganda.

The bedouin bold on his
charger fleet,
Scours o'er the desert
wild;
Woe to the wretch he may
chance to meet!
For he is Misfortune's
child.

Turn, pilgrim, turn away
thy face;
Or thy lot may be deplored:
The Bedouin moves with a
rapid pace,
And keen is his cruel
sword.

The daring Bedouin laughs
to scorn,
The laws that men impose;

He makes the widow and
orphan mourn,
And his breast no mercy
knows.

He has no home but
the desert wild;
No friends but his steed
and blade:
Oh! Fly from his path, ye
simple child
For rapine is his trade.

While yet ye may, thy
steps retrace;
And never by hope of gain,
Be tempted to meet the
Bedouin's face,
Or cross his path,
again.

SOURCES FOR MAPS AND FIGURES

Map 1: The Mogul Empire, 1605. William Foster, ed., Early Travels in India: 1583 - 1619. Oxford University Press, London, 1921

Map 2: Russian-British Advances to Afghanistan Over Three Centuries. W.K. Fraser-Tytler, Afghanistan, 3rd edition, Oxford University Press, New York, 1967. p. 128.

Map 3: South-Central Asia in 1990. Task Force on Militarization in Asia and the Pacific, June 1988.

Figure 1: Jahangir. Foster, op. cit. p. 80

Figure 2: Coryat on an Elephant. Ibid. p. 248.

Figure 3: Edward Terry. Ibid. p. 288.

Figure 5: "Afghans Professionally Employed", Lieut.-Col. Alexander Burnes, Cabool: Being a Personal Narrative of a Journey to, and Resident in that City in the Years 1836, 7, and 8, John Murray, London, 1842.

Figure 6: Dost Mohammed Khan. Ibid.

Figure 7: Alexander Burnes, Ibid.

FOOTNOTES

1. H.A.R. Gibb, The Travels of Batuta, iii, p. 84, quoted in W.K. Fraser-Tytler, Afghanistan, 3rd edition, Oxford University Press, 1967, New York, Toronto. p. 4.
2. Fraser-Tytler, op. cit. p. 35.
3. William Foster, ed., Early Travels in India: 1583 - 1619. Oxford University Press. London 1921, p. 163.
4. Mountstuart Elphinstone, An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul, and its Dependencies in Persia, Tartary and India, Richard Bentley, New Burlington Street, London, 1839. p. 188.
5. Fraser-Tytler, op. cit., pp. 51 and 183.
6. Rishtia, Qasim, Afghanistan dar Qaran-i-Nauzdham, (publisher not known), Kabul, (published between 1950 and 1955). Reprinted in Raja Anwar, The Tragedy of Afghanistan, Verso, 1989, London, p. 11.
7. Dilip Kumar Ghose, England and Afghanistan, The World Press Private Ltd., Calcutta, 1960, p. 16.
8. Incidentally, Britain's policy of favoring the Pushtuns boosted the strength of this group vis-a-vis other ethnic groups in Afghanistan, laying the foundation for the ethnic strife that erupted there in the 1970s and persists amidst Afghan refugee populations.
9. Quoted in the Friend of India, Aug. 10, 1865, reprinted in Ghose, op. cit., p. 9.
10. It is an interesting historical footnote that the Afghan territory annexed by the British in the 1879 war today is under the formal jurisdiction of Pakistan, but remains autonomous and is not subject to Pakistani law.
11. Anwar, op. cit., p. 15
12. Fraser-Tytler, op. cit., p. 6.

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