

# Silence, Memory, Militancy And The Military In Pakistan's Swat Valley

Sunday 25 October 2020, by [SHAH Hurmat Ali](#) (Date first published: 1 October 2020).

**Swat Valley used to be green. Now the green looks dull and grey. The people living here are tired. They forget. And when personal histories, and personal and collective geographies are marred with memories of violence, isn't short-term memory loss the natural answer? Who has the courage to confront memory amidst the rhythm of the everyday, lay it to rest, and more painfully, make sense of all the killings and the aftermath - that is, a military regimenting a whole population for the crime of being conquered by a militant group?**

Swat is a mountainous area, known for its scenic beauty. The locals would tell you with pride that once Queen Elizabeth II called it "Switzerland of the East". A militant movement emerged in Swat around 2002-03, and started its violent campaign in 2006. For the next three years, the whole region saw dogfighting between the armed forces of Pakistan and the Taliban. Swat is best known as Malala Yousafzai's hometown, but also as the backdrop to her heroic tale. In that background lurks the shadow of Fazlullah, leader of the Swat faction of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and later its head. Over time, the humans of the valley and their fears, memories and history are lost. They feature as passive agents who were oppressed by the Taliban - the standard story of people suffering under militant fanatics, while being delivered from tyranny by the courage and bravery of the armed forces.

I can't think of the past without invoking the memory of childhood friends who were either killed by the Taliban or who joined the Taliban themselves. I can't recall my own past without remembering the deaths I have seen, or which were connected to me.

Dilawar Khan, my cousin, was standing in the doorway of a room in his own home. A bullet pierced his chest. He fell into his sister's lap. There was a curfew in place. He could not be carried to hospital and bled to death in his sister's arms. He was 17 years old.

Over time, the humans of the valley and their fears, memories and history are lost.

Mehboob Ali, my age. A bad singer and a good bowler. He once hit me in the face with a full-toss while I was batting. From that day on I was afraid to bat against him when playing cricket. He later joined the police force. The Taliban warned him to leave, so he started to work at his elder brother Ahmad's pharmacy. One evening in 2009, during Ramadan, he was rushing home on a motorcycle with Ahmad when someone opened fire. 23-year-old Mehboob died on the spot.

Ahmad Ali survived till the next morning. Ahmad used to be a labourer in Karachi while at the same time pursuing higher education. He saved money, received a diploma in medicine, came back home and opened the store. He had dreams, but terrorism took him. He was 32 years old.

Bakht Baidar, my older brother's friend, used to be skilled at parodying actors. He joined the police in 2010. He was assigned to be security guard to a member of the peace council. That elder was attacked and Bakht died protecting him. He left behind a beautiful two-year-old daughter. He was 36

years old.

These were deaths at the hands of the Taliban. They cast long shadows. But why did the Taliban first emerge there? And more importantly, what happened when people were 'delivered from tyranny' by the security forces?

## **The Swat state**

Before merging into Pakistan in 1969, Swat was a princely state under the British Empire, and was later allowed by the Pakistani state to function as a semi-autonomous region. To the locals, the era of Swat state is utopian, to be recalled with profound nostalgia and loss, but also pride. The militancy in Swat is explained by many theories, from the peasants' reaction to feudal lords, to the ideological appeal of Islamist militancy. Locals also theorise that the state deliberately portrayed Taliban presence in Swat as an immediate threat with the goal of gaining funding and control of the region (and perhaps, even to distract from growing Taliban presence in Waziristan), a plan which went badly awry in the end. These theories may have a certain grain of truth, speculative though they may be. But the reason why militancy erupted in Swat, and not for the first time, can't be explained without explaining the causes and context. The lingering memory of Swat state was used as an icon for social justice and development, providing the medium through which the ideas of Shariat could flow.

In 1849, spiritual leader Saidu Baba convened a jirga (a traditional assembly of leaders), which led to the formation of the first Swat state under Amir Syed Akbar Shah, though it lapsed soon after the war for independence in 1857. The ensuing decades saw fierce resistance to British colonialism, and the British mounted many campaigns to subdue the people of the region. These excursions were spectacles of violence, and often whole villages would be burnt down as a collective punishment for rebellion against the Raj, as Sultan-i-Rome recounts in *Swat State, 1915-1969 from Genesis to Merger*.

These were deaths at the hands of the Taliban. They cast long shadows. But why did the Taliban first emerge there?

Theological student and reformist Sandakai Baba was instrumental in establishing the second Swat state in 1915, which collapsed in 1916. Eventually, the grandson of Saidu Baba, Miangul Abdul-Wadood, founded the third Swat state in 1917, which was formally recognised by the British in 1926.

The Sharia law of Swat state was a curious mix of the Raj's penal system and bureaucracy with local clerics and tradition. That law was enforced by the army and law enforcement authorities of Swat state, which in 1969 had over 9000 security personnel for a population that consisted of a few hundred thousand people, as Sultan-i-Rome told me in an interview. The officers of the state would be trained in basic law and governance by the British bureaucratic system in place. The district administration (the state's administration was modeled upon the administrative structure of the Raj and then later of Pakistan) would decide matters of law, justice and administration, but if one wanted to have matters decided by 'Islamic law' they could be referred to a Qazi court (a court of an Islamic scholar). The silver lining was that the Qazi court's decisions had to be approved by an administrative officer. Wali-e-Swat (the official title of the ruler) was the final appellate body. The penal code was harsh and justice speedy but the rulings often went against all standards of the modern legal system, as locals still recall.

In Swat, Sharia was a name given to a penal system for the sake of legitimacy. The state had a rigorous taxation policy and, given the small population at the time, governance and development was efficient. There is this narrative born out of later national discourse (particularly during the

'Afghan Jihad' era) which equates development, efficient governance and prosperity with a Sharia legal code and system. After the merger with Pakistan, the often unjust but speedy legal system was replaced by the inefficient Pakistani courts. All development was stalled. The result was the growth of public anger and a general ideological turn towards Islamisation throughout the 1980s, and then a full-fledged militant movement, the Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi, led by Sufi Muhammad under the slogan, "Ya Shariat ya Shahadat!" (Give us either Sharia or martyrdom!)

War was followed not by peace but by silence.

In 1994, the leader of the insurgency, Muhammad, was able to capture the grievances of the people in a simple slogan that invoked a time of plenty. Social equality was a common thread in the call for Sharia. It was fabricated for the most part, as is the way of nostalgia. The memory of purportedly simpler times was invoked to serve the needs of a fundamentalist polity. The fact that Sharia rule was only in name was forgotten. Memories are often utopian and can be appropriated or manipulated for any cause given the nature of the moment and the shrewdness of key players in history.

Sufi Muhammad was succeeded by his son-in-law Fazal Hayat, aka Fazlullah, who later went on to lead Tehreek-e-Taliban, an umbrella organisation of various militant groups based along the Afghan-Pakistani border. His militancy was deadly because right in the middle of 'mainstream' Pakistan he was able to work with tools of modern-day destruction, from media outreach to every kind of ammunition and a vast number of professional militants who had been trained by the Pakistani state for its militancy projects in Afghanistan and Kashmir.

The militancy in Swat found support among the landless, but that was because they had the least to lose from continuing the status-quo and the most to gain from a new beginning with themselves in power. Post the US-led war on terror, Pakistan also saw a rise in both terrorist acts and sympathy for the Taliban's cause. The rise of Fazlullah in a place which had been part of mainland Pakistan (not part of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, ruled through colonial-era laws and structures) shows how global conflict, national contestation and narratives peddled by the right kind of polity can feed into and merge with local history to create insurgency, affecting thousands and displacing around 1.7 million people.

After nearly the whole valley came under Taliban's control in 2008, they became the new authority and erected a parallel state structure consisting of a military commander, an administrative head and a qazi (judge) at the local level. The life spent under a parallel system was the same as the old, but with renewed ferocity and a mania for control.

### **Life post-Taliban**

When the military operations combating the Taliban were over, there was hope for relief and that there could be closure after law and order was restored. But what exactly happened after the counterterrorism operation?

Umer, a paralysed young man, presumed to be with the Taliban, was thrown from a helicopter at River Swat near Kanju, my hometown. No one was allowed to recover his body. Peer Ehsan, a deadly Taliban commander, had his dead torso dragged through the mohallah (neighbourhood) by an army jeep. Umara Khan's bleeding body was paraded through our village tied to an army jeep and then thrown in the centre of the village the next day. Yes, these people were Taliban or were accused of being Taliban; but what kind of memories will these gory and violent incidents leave in people's minds? And what impact does it have when this spectacle is justified by a legitimate state?

The people of Swat dreamed of a social justice system where people had some control over their fate. That dream wasn't fulfilled by the Pakistani state.

A personal experience, one among many memories and anecdotes of post-Taliban life.

One day at around 9 am in the morning it was announced that all men, including boys above ten were to gather at the airfield at 11 am sharp. My mohallah is sandwiched between the airport and the Frontier Constabulary headquarters. There was rising fear and you could sense that everyone was silently wondering what was going to happen. Since before I was born, there has been talk of extending the airport boundaries, meaning the erasure of our mohallah and our homes. Before that day, people had resisted this push, but the question now was how could anyone dare stand up to the army if the major general gave people the news to pack and leave. The announcement said that after 11 am the army would patrol the streets, and if any man was found at home or on the streets, they alone would be responsible for the consequences.

In the parading of Swat as a success story, the lives and pain of people were pushed to the background.

The homes could be raided with no men around, by other men wearing big boots and big guns. When the time came, men said their goodbye. Women started reciting prayers, and gold and valuables were hidden in that one sandooq (big bag) left in the corner of an unused bathroom. At the airfield old men were downcast. Maybe they felt humiliated after having taken pride in their culture, Hujra and courage all their lives, that they were now waiting, like sheep, for a speech. Society was being surveilled where the only words that mattered were those of a soldier with a gun. That was the day I experienced how social institutions, history, memory, traditions, systems of honour and hierarchy could collapse under the logic of violence and war.

The general took the microphone and said how much the people gathered there owed the army, and how much the people must love the army since we had all come to listen to him. A joke maybe, or he was unaware of how the 'field commanders' had forced everyone to gather there, unless they wanted to have their bodies scarred. The general announced that from that day onwards there would be no guns. All guns would have to be registered with the army (even if they were licensed), and from that night onward neighbourhood watch committees would be formed, which reported to the nearest army picket. The general shouted "Pakistan" and we replied "Zindabaad".

People ran to their homes to see what had happened, but luckily the soldiers had not checked every home for the men who had gone into hiding. We got to keep our homes in return for the humiliation of saluting the army havaldar a few times every night, of protecting army lines with axes and lathis. Such incidents occurred frequently and we were fortunate that our mohallah didn't experience violence. But word of incidents in other areas was enough to make us tremble at the words "General wants to talk to you at the airport field."

In Swat the army has occupied not only land, but minds through their messaging on how Swat should be portrayed. The people resist, though in small ways.

When people returned to their homes after being displaced for around three months during the final stages of combat between the military and the Taliban, they found the army occupying several homes within 400-500 metres of each other, surrounded by barbed wire and with checkpoints nearby. Surveillance was normalised in neighbourhoods, with soldiers who didn't speak the local language, Pashto. The army hotline numbers were widely publicised and people were asked to tip off anyone who had helped the Taliban in any way. Many tips came. Old scores were easily settled. A visit by the army could mean three or four months in custody with frequent torture. The stories of torture

and abductions are almost too many, even for a book.

People were compelled to wear security cards all the time. They were special cards, made after screening at the nearest army post, and superseded the national ID card as proof of good citizenship. Checkposts became spaces where humiliation, surveillance and control were exercised. The aim was always to disrupt the flow of daily life rather than to intervene and prevent violence.

After the military operation, Swat was portrayed to the world as a success story for counter-insurgency operations. Initiatives such as the rehabilitation training centres for the Taliban militants were undertaken and publicised, while the arbitrary detentions and violence at the internment centers were simultaneously whitewashed. Through the 2011 Action (in Aid of Civil Power) regulation, the army gained sweeping powers in detention and prosecution. Their extra-legal methods of control were of their own devising, and they acted and still act with impunity. War was followed not by peace but by silence.

In the parading of Swat as a success story, the lives and pain of people were pushed to the background. When foreign missions were flown into the valley, to see rehabilitation centres and be briefed, including with statistics on the number of security force and militant deaths, the misery of the people was never captured.

### **The mantra of development**

Then came the mantra of development. Swat had to be a tourist haven again, this time under the auspices of the security forces. The valley was presented as peaceful, with majestic natural scenery to explore, while its people lived on with broken hearts, charred homes, and scores of loved ones missing. People welcomed the tourists. They brought with them a sense of continuity, the illusion that things were well, but how could all be well when old wounds were still open and new ones were inflicted in secret?

Everywhere you go in Swat there are signboards reminding you of the service that the Pakistan army has rendered. Even archaeological sites are not spared. There is an army signboard next to a mosque believed to be made on orders by Mahmood Ghazanavi, which says that the place was reconstructed and gifted to the people of Swat by the Pakistan army, even though it has been there for decades. These are the visible signs of the colonisation of land and public space by the Pakistan army. Everywhere people go in Swat, they are forced to realise that the only sentiment allowed is that of fear and gratitude to the army. The army becomes the mediator between the people and their own landscape and history. They have created an invisible, but forceful, border between people and their reality through legends, symbols and exhortations. In Swat the army has occupied not only land, but minds through their messaging on how Swat should be portrayed. The people resist, though in small ways. Someone has blackened the references to the army on one of the signboards, a visual metaphor of how the people of Swat see the army.

Swat is no more a 'Switzerland of the East'. It is a graveyard of stories and voices unheard.

Last but not least, there is the ecological vandalism of the valley in the name of promoting tourism. A motorway project built alongside Swat River and piercing Swat to the hills of Kalam will permanently scar the scenery and landscape. It is expected to be completed by June 2021. The fact that the land near the river is the 'rice basket' of Swat has to be discounted, for the sake of 'development'. Similarly, road projects to tourist hotspots like Gabeen Jabba, Jarogo Waterfall and Kalam Valley don't take into account the damage to pastures and forests. (These roads are often preceded by army rest houses.) There has been heavy deforestation under the Taliban. Rather than letting the forest grow organically, new species of trees were planted, particularly under the

Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf's (PTI) Billion Tree Tsunami campaign, because they don't need much care and are sure to grow. They are causing damage to the soil and possibly to the water-table.

Swat River used to be brimming with fish and even Swati trout in the upper regions of the river. But now the waste of hundreds of hotels along the river is directly dumped into it. The infrastructure of the valley can't absorb the burden of its own population, the army rest houses as well as unplanned tourism. Talking about these issues has become synonymous with 'anti-state' activity as any criticism of this environmental damage disrupts the linear success story constructed by the army. Yet the development in Swat has to be critically debated. The posturing and rhetoric of development can't be allowed to transform a green home, home to 2.3 million people as per the 2017 census, into a barren concrete jungle.

When a major rally for the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) –a movement born as a response to war and demanding accountability for all the wars waged on Pashtun land – was held in Swat, it was attended by tens of thousands. It remains one of the largest gatherings in Swat Valley. The build-up to the rally was tense as young leaders of the movement were branded 'the new Taliban' coming to disrupt the 'peace' through coordinated propaganda posters. Intimidation preceded the rally but people flocked to it with pictures of their missing loved ones and shared harrowing tales.

There are glimpses of resistance. People talk in hushed voices of the trauma, but never openly. People want to move on but the constant presence of army soldiers reminds them not only of the past but also the chained present. Though the checkpoints and the presence of soldiers in public spaces have been cut down following PTM protests, the fear of imminent violence at the hands of the security forces, for openly talking about the past and calling for accountability, remains. Swat is no more a 'Switzerland of the East'. It is a graveyard of stories and voices unheard.

---

**Hurmat Ali Shah** is interested in writing on socio-political issues. He is particularly interested in the national core-periphery relations in Pakistan. He currently is a post-doctoral researcher.

*[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.*

---

**P.S.**

International South Asia Forum

<http://www.insafbulletin.net/archives/4490>