



Sigur Center
for Asian Studies

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

The Art of Chieftaincy in the Writings of Pashtun Tribal Rulers

The writings of Khūshhāl Khān Khatak and Afzal Khan Khatak represent a distinct independent niche in Pashto literature of pre-modern times. This iconic grandfather-grandson duo were men of letters and warriors. Their work is rooted in a broad literary tradition comprising the classical *Mirror of Princes*, a genre of political advice literature originating in the 6th century. The writings of these two leading Pashtun figures are well known for laying down principles of conduct for rulers and describing the social and political life in the heyday of Mughal times in the 16th and 17th centuries. The feudal ideology of governance and the principle of one-man power are ascribed to these writings. Mikhail Pelevin, a scholar from St. Petersburg State University, Russia, [recently delivered a talk at the Sigur Center for Asian Studies](#) shedding light on Pashto military elite thinking of the time as reflected in the literature of Khūshhāl Khān Khatak and Afzal Khan Khatak.

The influence of this literature was wide ranging, encompassing areas in current day Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Iran. Pelevin first addressed the

literary background of the early modern Mirrors of Princes. The roots of this literature lie in pre-Islamic Sasanian books of instructions. Written ordinances and political testaments known as the waṣiyya became the new ideological founding of the first kings. In the Persian world, the Mirrors for Princes text laid down the concept of the ideal ruler. However, it was in the 16th – 17th centuries during the golden age of the Mughal period that these writings flourished in South Asia. Unlike “cosmopolitan” literature, Pashto literature was intended for a small and mature audience. Prior to the writing of the Dastar nama (Book of Turban) by Khūshḥāl Khan, the Tarikih-i-Khanjahani was the only text on the Pashtuns that contained information on the Khatak tribe’s history and genealogy.

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A recurring theme in the Dastar nama was the emphasis Khūshḥāl Khan placed on education. He had written the book in 1665 while imprisoned by the Mughals in Ranthambhor, India. The turban itself was a symbol of power and knowledge and the Dastar nama outlined twenty qualities (arts) that a noble ruler should possess to be worthy of wearing the turban. Literacy was a priority in Khūshḥāl’s works. The importance of literacy in his work reflected the poor state of formal education amongst Pashto tribesmen. Several of Khūshḥāl’s writings were influenced by his own experiences. His emphasis on literacy may have stemmed from the fact that his own father was illiterate. Khūshḥāl’s focus on literacy is particularly notable as he is popularly

considered by many as the ‘father’ of written Pashto. Other factors emphasized in his writings were valor and honor.

Khūshhāl’s own ascendancy to chieftaincy led him to write about his views on governance and the need for self-restraint in his poetry. In his poems he elaborates on Pashtun laws of honor such as generosity and valor. However, he warns against corrupt practices of rulers. He regrets killing others and serving the Mughal authority. In the same breath, Khūshhāl preaches restraint on expenditure such as that on fine clothing. Khūshhāl’s frustration with infighting among the Khataks is also evident in these poems. He finds tribal assemblies ineffective and tends to see one-man authoritarian rule as the only viable form of governance.

Khūshhāl’s grandson, Afzal Khan’s writings also elaborate Pashtun sensibilities of political power. These writings are comprised of diaries and memoirs that

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depicted the art of chieftaincy in practice. There is a discourse on the divine nature of political powers. God chooses rulers and kings and disobedience to them is comparable to the disobedience to God. Afzal also outlines the forms of administrative authority. These include consensual (chosen by the clan), hereditary (by birth) and appropriative (by force). All of these forms of power are legitimate. However, power seized by force is acceptable only if people are better off under the new ruler than they were previously. Both

Khūshhāl and Afzal also outline the “testament,” which advocated certain policy directives to tribesman. Unlike the Sasanian books of instructions, the testament did not lay down specific principles that must be followed

but rather communicated broad directives that should be adopted, ultimately leaving the choice to adopt them up to the wisdom and discretion of the chieftain. The testament also did not contain names or dates in contrast to the diaries and memoirs written by the duo. While the combined writings of these two figures offer great insight into the nature of Pashto military and political thinking historically, it should be added that their influence continues to linger in tribal life of the region even today.

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The Rising Powers Initiative is a program at the Sigur Center.



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