

# *Fakir of Ipi: A Brief Review of the anti-British Activities of a Waziri Mujahid*

**Farah Gul Baqai**

Haji Mirza Ali Khan commonly known as the Fakir of Ipi, who took a stand against the then super-power, gave the British a tough time in the Waziristan Tribal area of North West Frontier Province. The aim of this article is to highlight the anti-British activities of the Fakir of Ipi, a legend of the tribal belt of Waziristan. The discussion would remind the readers of a brave and daring person who challenged British onslaught in the tribal region.

Demanded exclusively like the Osama bin Laden, the Fakir of Ipi who declared *jihad* against the alien rulers was shelled, bombed and shot at by the British Indian Army for over a decade. He escaped all such threats and died his own natural death in 1960. "Mountain artillery have shelled him, regiments have gone into action against him, but he has wriggled out of every hole until then. If they want him, they needed to dig him like a badger".<sup>1</sup>

The Fakir of Ipi, was born in 1901 in a village hamlet called Kurta, one kilometre from Khajuri post in the western end of the Tochi valley's Shinki defile. His father, Shaykh Arsala Khan, and grandfather were local religious figures and belonged to the landed aristocracy of the area. Arsala Khan died when Mirza Ali Khan was 12 years old. Still Mirza Ali Khan managed to attend the primary school at Idak, and later pursued independent religious studies among the Dauris and in Bannu Tehsil. As a young man, he came into contact with the *khilafatist and Swarajist*

---

Farah Gul Baqai, Research Fellow, NIHCR, Islamabad.

1. *Evening Standard*, (daily), May 31, 1939, L/PS/12/3236, "Faqir of Ipi, Question of Co-operation by Afghan Government in Operation against the Faqir of Ipi".

thought. He also became a *murid* of the *Naqib* of Chaharbagh, a prominent *Qadariyyah* sufi, and was rewarded by his *pir* with *Khilafah*.<sup>2</sup>

According to British intelligence reports the Fakir of Ipi was a British-Indian civil servant posted at Peshawar. It was his protest against the property tax, the holding of post-mortem examinations of dead bodies in criminal cases and certain other British regulations, that set him up as the champion of Islam. The Waziri's their hometown being a rocky land full of stones and scraggy grass lived only by resorting to looting and plunder of travellers. It was for this reason that the British sent expeditions to control law and order and fought against the various sections of the Waziri tribesmen in 1852, 1859, 1860, 1880, 1894, 1897, and 1902.<sup>3</sup>

In 1936 an incidence occurred that provided a rallying point for Wazir opposition to the British; an incident that propelled Mirza Ali Khan to the centre of some of the bloodiest and most serious Frontier conflicts of the twentieth century. The catalyst was a Pushtun Romeo and Juliet story set in the mountains south-east of Pennel's town of Bannu. A young Waziri from the village of Jhandu Khel fell in love with a Hindu girl from Bannu. He persuaded her to run away with him, become Muslim and marry him. The girl accepted Islam, changed her name to Islam Bibi and married the Pakhtun Muslim. This incident was enough to give vent to the Hindu-Muslim resentments that had been smouldering in the Wazir settled area for decades. The girl's parents appealed to the British authorities who arrested the elopes and subsequently returned the girl to her parents. The Waziri sensibilities were enraged and clans of the Tori Khel, to which the young man belonged, and their neighbours the Madda Khel rebelled beneath the unifying religious cries of local hermit from the village of Ipi. Mirza Ali Khan, from then on, to be known as the Fakir of Ipi.<sup>4</sup>

In 1936 Olaf Caroe was made the Resident in Waziristan. This was the time when Fakir of Ipi was raising the Islamic flag and rebellion was brewing across the Waziristan. Caroe had to supervise enquiries in the

---

2. Alan Warren, *Waziristan*, "The Faqir of Ipi and the Indian Army" (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2000, 84-85 and Abdul Hameed Tareen, *Faqir Ipi*, (Urdu) (Karachi, N.P., 1984), 65-67.

3. *Empire*, "News Review", June 8, 1939, IOR/PS/12/3236.

4. Andre Singer, *Lords of the Khyber, the Story of North West Frontier*, (London: Jaber and Jaber, 1984), 173.

Government dealings with local insurrections. Diplomacy rather than force was the solution he favoured, but peace was never properly regained and Caroe returned to Dehli as Foreign Secretary to the Governor, with unrest still prevalent. The Fakir of Ipi was still at large in the Waziristan region, and in Peshawar the Khan brothers were still mobilising opposition to the British.<sup>5</sup>

The British handing over of Islam Bibi to the Hindus became a religious issue with the Muslim Pakhtuns and the Fakir of Ipi got religious sanction to attack the Hindu community. The young men eager for fight in which they could prove themselves superior to their enemy readily became willing listeners to fervent articulation of the Fakir. Politics inside India was having more and more influence on the Frontier affairs. The Islam Bibi and Shahid Ganj mosque cases further aroused religious zeal. In 1936, the Fakir of Ipi, declared that Islam was endangered and tried to kindle religious ethos among Muslims and appealed to every Muslim to resort to Holy War. He raised a *lashkar* of Daurs among whom he lived in the Tochi valley and threatened Bannu's Hindu traders,<sup>6</sup> their demand only being the return of Islam Bibi to her husband. The Tori Khel Maliks professed inability to control Ipi unless the British demonstrated strong support for them against the hotheaded elements of the tribe. The girl's parents took the case to the British Indian court. The Magistrate in Bannu heard the case and ordered that until she came of age the girl must live with a respectable Muslim family in Bannu. Agitation then quietened down until the Judicial Commissioner in Peshawar reversed the magistrate's judgement and ordered Islam Bibi to be returned to her Hindu parents. But the Court of Appeal again sent her back to the respectable Muslim family. In the meanwhile the Fakir's tribe, the Tori Khel Waziris rose in furious rebellion against the British. To teach them a lesson two Brigades advanced into their country<sup>7</sup> and revived an earlier plan to build a road up to the narrow side of the Tochi into which Ipi and his followers had retreated. On November 25, 1936, two brigades moved into the valley from opposite directions to clear the concerned area in preparation for the road work. Both columns came under heavy fire almost at once and in two days' fighting nineteen were killed and more than hundred wounded. A new expedition in greater strength was mounted that pushed its way up

---

5. Muhammad Yunus, *Frontier Speaks*, (Lahore: Minerva, 1942), 88-89.

6. Charles Chenevix Trench, *The Frontier Scouts*, (Suffolk: Oxford University Press, 1985), 148.

7. Charles Chenevix Trench, *Viceroy Agent*, (London: N.P., 1987), 67-68.

the valley with little resistance. While a kind of agreement was reached with the local *Maliks*, Ipi fled to the Mahsud territory country where he settled down at Aarsal Kot in the Shaktu valley. The Mahsud fame had now spread throughout India. From his new headquarters, he organised a number of small bands of both Tori Khel and Mahsud young men, and set them to harassing British Personnel's and uprooting their installations over a wide area in guerrilla style actions. On February 6, 1937, a British captain of the South Waziristan Scouts was murdered by the Mahsuds. The following day a British assistant political officer was killed in the Tochi while on his way to pay the *Khassadars*.

These events were followed by a series of raids into the settled district in which Hindus suffered heavily, thirty-one being kidnapped, ten killed and sixty having their houses sacked and burned. On April 9, a large convoy coming down from Wana was ambushed in the Shahur Tangi by a lashkar under Khonia Khan, a Jalel Khel Mahsud, and several British officers were also killed.<sup>8</sup>

In March 1937, releasing the information about the Fakir of Ipi to the members of the Provincial Assembly, it was stated that the British were forced to fight against the Fakir because he was desirous to become the President of contemplated Independent Republic of the Frontier Tribes. The Government denied on the floor of the house of having deployed Indian army agent to the Faqir and lamented for his having refused to make peace with the Government. Metcalfe told the house that the responsibility for the continuance of hostilities rested solely on the Fakir and few of his henchmen mostly (275 in number) outlaws from British India and that the rest of the tribes were not with him as they were maintaining good relations with the Government. In fact a small band of disgruntled tribesmen under the leadership of Fakir roamed around, attacked Government forces, which compelled the authorities to maintain military forces in the region in addition to the ordinary garrison. These forces would remain until normal conditions prevailed. The tribes had been informed that no further punishment would be exacted from the Fakir and his followers provided they ceased their activities, settled down peacefully, and surrendered without ransom the kidnapped persons that were held in captivity.<sup>9</sup>

---

8. James W., Spain, *The Pathan Borderland* (Hague: N.P., 1961), 290.

9. *The Times*, 12 November, 1938, IOR 2/P&S/12/3236.

Leaders of the lawless tribes were fanatically following the Fakir of Ipi and helped him in stirring up trouble in North West Waziristan. This disturbing information made the British depute about six thousand British soldiers to start a manhunt. Mirza Ali Khan, on the other hand knew his powers over the frontier tribes, his own ability to be here today and gone tomorrow on his small ponies that could run up the sides of mountains. He knew no one could find out his hideout, for secret service men had looked him high and low and he knew that no one would give him away.<sup>10</sup>

A confidential Air Mail correspondence between the Secretary to the Government of India External Affairs Department and the Under Secretary of State, in early 1939 informs us about the explicitly give date and place of the air-action taken against the tribes harbouring Fakir of Ipi:

- (a) In the Shawal Tangi from the 3 to the 23 December, 1938.
- b) In the Gorwekht, Margha and Mastoi area from the 23 to the 31 December, 1938.
- c) Against the village of Tarmora from the 5 January 1939 and
- d) against the village of Narraki in the Lataka area from 21 January to 25 January.

Another Intelligence report also confirms that the British secret service was desperately after Mirza Ali Khan. Extracts from Peshawar weekly Intelligence Report dated 8th August, 1938 shows Fakir at Dizha area, 8 1/2, miles south – south-west of Maizar in Saidgi limits, and he is said to be visiting his family at Gulmat Shah Kot, 4 miles west of Maizar.

In another correspondence between W.K.Fraser Tytler and Metcalfe suggests the reason why the British were unsuccessful in capturing the Fakir of Ipi. It was explained that the Government of India had prohibited a direct order of expulsion, because such an order if given openly to a tribe may result in a dangerous agitation, and might also annoy the Afghan Government who would look on it as an unfriendly act and consequently refuse to co-operate. It was, therefore, considered advisable not to handle this case in so direct a fashion.<sup>11</sup> Having decided to use indirect methods, all direct overtures were discontinued. F.D.

---

10. *Daily Mail*, 6th February, 1940, Captioned "Fighting the Fakir Again", IOR 2/P&S/12/3236.

11. L/PS/12/3236, *Fakir of Ipi, Question of Cooperation by Afghan Government in Operations Against the Fakir of Ipi*, 8th February, 1938, *British Legation, Kabul*, IOR 2/P&S/12/3236.

Cunningham, the Commissioner of Peshawar decided to approach the Fakir through the *Wali* of Swat, with a view to settling him for a few years in Swat under surveillance of the *Wali*.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand British Government continuously pressurised the Afghanistan Government not to co-operate with Fakir of Ipi. But the Afghan government refused to co-operate with the British against Fakir of Ipi. In a telegram dated 3rd November, 1937, the Afghanistan Prime-Minister regretted that he could not co-operate with the British Government on Ipi issue due to political and religious reasons. The Prime-Minister also pointed out that he will not permit any other government to interfere in British tribal territory. The Afghan Government eloquently told the British Government that they desire peace in the tribal areas and that they have no intention to rule the tribal territory.

The Prime-Minister also informs the British that Ipi was inciting Afghanis to enter British territory. The Government of India was asked to send troops against Ipi before it was too late. Finally he begged the Government of India to consider urgent possibility of summoning the Fakir of Ipi on safe conduct and settling with him politically.

The Indian Government secret service usually used to maintain a record on the movement of Fakir of Ipi, and his whereabouts, and people who visited him and what amount of money or kind they delivered to him. His sources of income were fully tapped by Indian Government. People of different villages were warned every now and then not to harbour Fakir of Ipi or his brother Sherzaman and not to join Fakir of Ipi *lashkar* that fought against British policies frequently.

### **Fakir of Ipi and Afghanistan**

Indian Government's retaliation against Fakir of Ipi led him into Afghanistan and with the help of his followers he attacked Indian Government posts in the border line area of Afghanistan and India. Afghanistan Government repeatedly warned British Indian Government that they would not find it possible to co-operate in an armed operation against the Fakir of Ipi.<sup>13</sup>

---

12. *Waziristan Situation 21 August – 28 October 1937 –14 October-28 January 1938*. Telegram, 15th and 16th November, 1937, IOR R/12/76.

13. (Reference IOR 2/P&S/12/3236, 11th November, 1937).

With the coming of World War II active fighting on the Frontier ended and mysteriously, as in earlier wars when the British were gravely threatened elsewhere, the Pathans relaxed their pressure. Ipi was never captured, however, and lived out his life in Pakistan to win for himself the honour of being the "most notorious hostile".<sup>14</sup>

The Faqir of Ipi maintained the banner of resistance in Waziristan during the final decade of British rule. He was pivotal in maintaining the independent image of the frontier region and remained in the forefront to protect tribal areas from outside influence. The Fakir of Ipi attained unprecedented political influence in Waziristan and his followers were ready to die in order to receive *Shahadat*.

This influence was the result of his possession of all the characteristics necessary for leadership in Pushtun society; charisma, courage, a religious cause and religious heritage. During his first year of rebellion, the Fakir and his followers caused over a thousand casualties among the British troops and the British Government in India was forced to mobilise three full divisions of over 50,000 men to fight against him. The Fakir's initial tactics were to raid British and Hindus alike. By ransoming the latter he managed to raise the funds with which to continue the struggle. His headquarters were initially in the Shakhtu caves near the town of Wana and his mystical reputation was enhanced by the failure of all attempts by strong Gurkha contingents to capture him there.

The British made an abortive attempt to capture Fakir of Ipi in 1937, he moved his base of operation to the even more inaccessible Gorwekht, almost on the Afghan border across which he and his men would slip when his opponents came too near. Upto 1939 the Fakir led a highly successful guerrilla war against the British. He was never captured, and although various Mahsud and Wazir clans capitulated, leaving him with depleted support, there were always others ready to follow him. It was yet another example of the kind of warfare at which the Pukhtuns excelled despite being outnumbered and short of modern weaponry. Some rather half-hearted efforts to raise the tribes against the British were made by the Italians and German missions, two agents lost their lives in attempting to contact the Fakir of Ipi, who by 1939 had become the Frontier's most notorious hostile. In 1941, Ipi apparently received a few hundred thousand Afghans from the axis powers in return for a pledge to

---

14. Ainslie T. Embree, *Pakistan Western Borderland*, (Karachi: N.P., 1977), 20-21.

use his forces against British India at the appropriate time, but nothing ever developed from the plan.

With the outbreak of second World War the British gained some sort of order in Waziristan through a policy of attrition. They used five times the manpower and introduced aircraft and armoured cars. Many of the Fakir's followers joined the British army to earn a salary and travel outside the Frontier area, but he and his close followers remained a source of trouble for the British..

Throughout the British influence in N.W.F.P the Wazirs toiled to be free, and in order to maintain their wild freedom they faced many fierce encounters with the strong forces employed against them by the British. The first conflict took place in 1850, when Brigadier Sir Neville Chamberlain and his forces carried an operation against Kabul Khel Wazirs. This made the people far too familiar with the government that was "toiling to improve their distracted condition".<sup>15</sup> The Waziri's were also loyal to their leaders as long as both honour and economic expediency were well served.<sup>16</sup>

Of the hill tribes, only two are worth mentioning, the Wazirs and Mahsuds. Though often at enmity with each other, these two tribes dominated the entire southern part of tribal territory. Their land being particularly barren and their history and reputation especially fierce, they gave the government of British India more trouble than any other tribe and produced such notable "hostile" as the Fakir of Ipi, and as late as 1937-38 took on several British divisions in what amounted to almost full-scale war.<sup>17</sup> Thus in the history of NWFP the Fakir was one of those few freedom fighters who played a major role in keeping the British at their toes during their rule in India.

At the end of the second World War, with Independence in the offing, many tribesmen once again felt that they could turn their attention to their previous paymasters. In the post-war years, until his death in 1960, the Fakir continued his 'Holy struggle from his cave hide-out, but his support was never as strong as before the war. One reason for this was that most Hindus had already left Waziristan, even before independence.

---

15. Muhammad Yunus, 176.

16. Written by numerous writers, *Pakistan Past and Present*, (London: Stacey International, 1977), 157.

17. Andre Singer, 176-177.



and those who remained left in 1947, one of the main target of Fakir's hatred had disappeared. With the departure of British and the foundation of an Islamic State of Pakistan, the religious base for his struggles was much weakened.

After Independence, the Fakir looked for and found another *cause celebre* to embrace and that was to advocate an independent 'Pukhtunistan'. For a short time, while Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the founder of the Pukhtunistan movement, was in prison, the Fakir became 'President of the imaginary nation. But by this time his following had evaporated thus his new cause failed to invoke the passions of his followers. The Fakir's descendants, particularly his nephew, are still revered and respected in Waziristan today as his spiritual successors; but at the time of his death in 1960 the Fakir was no longer regarded as a leader; he was already a legend. When the Fakir died *The Time* 'memory being short called him a man of principle and saintliness'.<sup>18</sup>

After the birth of Pakistan the Fakir of Ipi did not command the strength that he had in British-India. People listened to him because they were fighting against an alien power. But after the end of British rule, the Fakir's role also came to an end. Pakhtunistan movement had no appeal for the Pakhtuns who were satisfied with the achievement of Pakistan.

## Conclusion

The study of Fakir of the Ipi indicates that he was a Muslim, who would always stand up against invaders, plunderers and authoritarians. Fakir knew that the British were enemies of Islam and were interfering with Islamic laws, so they should be ousted from their land, and Islamic laws must be saved from non-Muslim interference. And this required the end of British rule. The British attempts to dilute the spirit of freedom in tribal areas by giving tribal allowances to win over local support to the British. The Fakir of Ipi took a stand not to side with British plans therefore, they tried their best to make a miserable example out of him. They wanted Ipi dead or alive and for it they had announced handsome reward and whichever tribe harboured him, the British "Royal Air Force" turned his village into ashes.

---

18. James W. Spain, 184.