

SAMEETAH AGHA, *The Limits of Empire, Sub-Imperialism and Pukhtun Resistance in the North-West Frontier* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan), 2020, pp. xiv + 231, ₹595.

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This study, which grew out of Sameetah Agha's doctoral dissertation at Yale University, examines the working of British imperialism in India's north-west frontier in the latter part of the nineteenth century. In particular, Agha studies British relations with the Pukhtun ('Afghan') tribes inhabiting the mountainous terrain between the administrative boundary of the British in the north-west and the Durand line defining Afghan territory. She throughout keeps in mind British apprehension about a possible Russian incursion through the passages in the north-west. Given this presumed threat, the British government adopted a policy of establishing 'security of passages' for itself while maintaining 'friendly relations with the tribes'. The Secretary of State in England did not object to a forward policy but was not in favour of 'any kind of collision with the tribesmen'. However, the civil and military officials directly responsible for action would often adopt an aggressive policy towards the tribes and after British military expeditions resulted in destruction of the tribesmen's houses, seizures of their cattle and grain, and the burning of their fields. Fines were also imposed on them from time to time. The author offers us a detailed study of the working of the British officials on the spot and the resistance offered by the tribal people, putting particular focus on the uprisings of 1897. Agha argues that this was not just 'a sudden or spontaneous rebellion' as officially contended, but 'the culmination of a continuous resistance against the imperial expansion'. She reconstructs the account of the tribal revolt from the perspectives of the tribes themselves and brings out how it reflected much popular discontent against the British. The author succeeds to a large extent in her attempt to 'bring forth the silenced stories of unheard voices'. The study is based on massive evidence which the author has collected in England, India and Pakistan. In particular, she has made extensive use of local records of British officials that are not easily accessible, as also of Pukhtun oral tradition.

Agha finds after her detailed narrative that the active or forward policy followed by the British in the north-west frontier ultimately proved a failure, owing largely to the resistance offered by the tribes. Indeed, the opposition offered by the tribes proved to be a major hurdle (or what the author describes as the 'external limit') to British imperialism in the north-west frontier. It may, however, be mentioned that the author does not appear adequately to explore the involvement of Afghanistan in the tribal struggle against the British, especially when the tribes had had a long history of political and cultural association with Afghanistan. This however does not in any way undermine the quality of this fascinating study of the history of people in the north-west frontier and the working of the British imperial machine, in which the interests and ambitions of its local arms could to a degree modify the broader perspectives of the central regime.

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