SThe Punitive Expedition of the Buner Field Force, 1898: Observations of an Archaeologist

Rafiullah Khan
Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad

In the imperial aura of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, archaeologists were not indifferent to socio-political developments in India. It is obvious, amongst others, from Sir Aurel Stein's works. This study particularly focuses on his *Detailed Report of an Archaeological Tour with the Buner Field Force* (1898). Stein, on the invitation of Major H. A. Deane, the first Political Agent of Malakand Agency, constituted in 1895, joined the punitive expedition of the Buner Field Force for an archaeological reconnaissance of the valley. The expedition aimed at punishing the tribes for participating in the 1897 uprisings at Malakand. Primarily concerned with archaeological survey, Stein also made observations on war and resistance. This study extracts these non-archaeological data from Stein's report with a special focus on routes and movements of the force and responses of the locals. All this has, finally, been assessed in the light of recent scholarly debates.

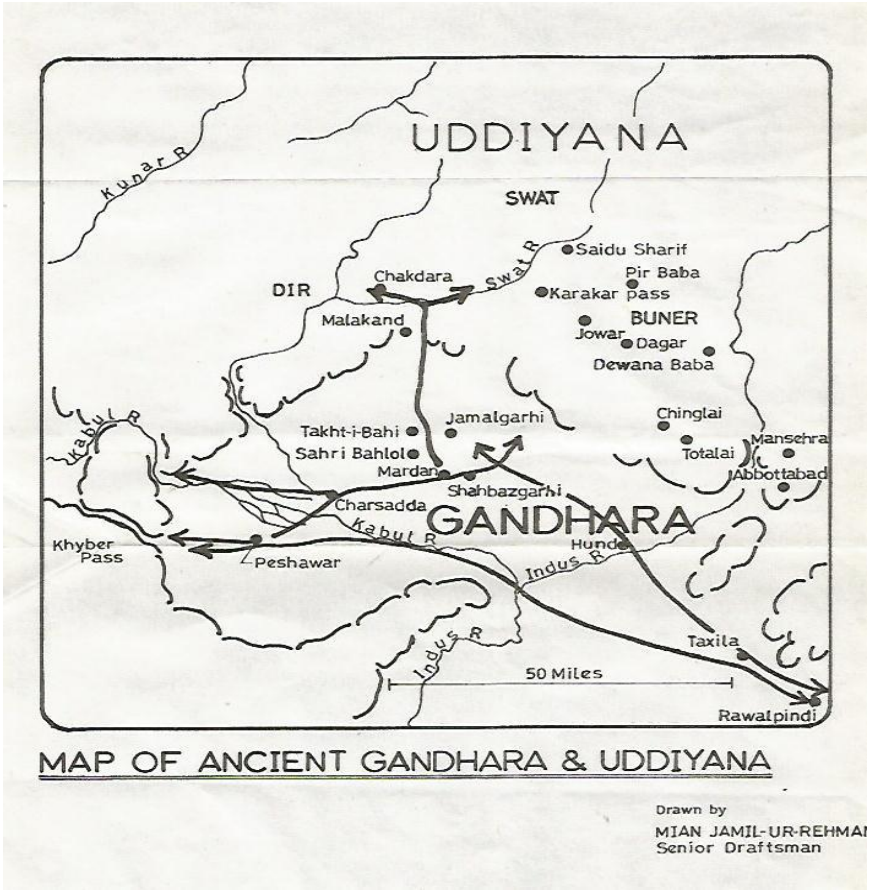
Keywords: Stein, Buner, *jargah*, British, force

The advent of British control in the Malakand and Swat area was accompanied by the beginning of archaeological research as well. The first Political Agent of the Malakand Agency, Major Harold Arthur Deane, C.I.S., was *a mature antiquarian* and greatly promoted the cause of archaeology. He remained as host to famous scholars such as Lawrence Austin Waddell, Alexander Caddy, Alfred Foucher and, above all, Sir Aurel Stein. The work done by this galaxy of European savants, including Major Deane himself, undoubtedly marks the formative phase of the archaeology in the region. We may also take notice of the fact that all this happened under the bayonets of colonial escorts and forces. It is nowhere clearer than in the context of the punitive expedition, called the Buner Field Force, into the valley in 1898.

The Buner Field Force was undertaken in the wake of the Pukhtuns' resistance to colonial control in the Malakand region in 1897. The forces marched into different parts of the valley for around two weeks. It also provided the opportunity to make an archaeological reconnaissance of Buner for the first time. Destiny bestowed the chance upon Sir Aurel Stein and he, on the invitation of Major Deane, accompanied the expedition. While his archaeological work has been already analyzed (Khan 2014), this paper focuses on the non-archaeological aspect of Stein's work on Buner. All through his visit in the company of soldiers busy in the battlefield, Stein also makes observations about the marches of the forces and the local tactics of warfare. This firsthand information can enrich our understanding about the nature of colonial punishment and local strategies of resistance.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Rafiullah Khan, Assistant Professor, Taxila Institute of Asian Civilizations, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Email: rafiulakhan@gmail.com

This study first gives a brief background of the Buner Field Force. Next, extractions in relation to war and its tactics are produced from Stein's report about the archaeological reconnaissance, titled *Detailed report of an archaeological tour with the Buner Field Force* (1898). Finally, all this has been critically seen so as to gain insights in relation to colonial and postcolonial contexts.



Buner in the wider context of Khyber-Pakhtukhwa. After Khattak, Buner: The Forgotten Part of Ancient Uddiyana (1997). Courtesy of Muhammad Habibullah Khan Khattak.

1897 and the Buner Field Force (1898)

The year 1897 is the most polemically debated moment in recent Pukhtun historiography (Ahmad 1976; Nichols 2001: 89-116). The resistance which broke out received a prompt colonial response. It had been hardly two years since the constitution of the Malakand Agency in 1895 that British Forts at Malakand and Chakdara were severely attacked by hordes of local people in late July 1897. It seemingly happened unexpectedly. People from Swat, Buner, Dir and Bajawar participated in the uprisings. It seems that initially the problem was not seen as serious and the activities of Sartor Faqir were taken lightly. However, the challenge gained strength day by day. Finally, the Malakand operation started (Sultan-i-Rome 1994, 1995). Initially, the forces were headed by Colonel-General Meiklejohn but soon he was replaced by Brigadier Bindon Blood (Mills 1897/1979: 35).

The completion of the Malakand operation was followed by the constitution of a punitive expedition which traversed Swat in August the same year. It included three brigades under the command of General Blood. Buner was probably next on the list; however, uprisings in Momand and Tirah put it on pending for the time being. It was not until late December that it became clear that a punitive expedition would be soon dispatched to Buner. It was mostly out of the Swat expedition's brigades that General Blood formed his Buner Field Force which extensively operated in the valley (Perrett 2007: 237). As it was permitted in war times, General Blood was also 'given full political charge' and DC Peshawar, Mr. Bunbury (ICS) and Lieutenant C.P. Down joined as Assistant Political Officers. The force consisted of the following (from, *Frontier and overseas expeditions from India* 1907: 312):

First Brigade in the command of Brigadier-General W.H. Meiklejohn: 1st Bn. Royal West Kent Regiment; 16th Bengal Infantry; 20th Punjab Infantry; 31st Punjab Infantry.

Second Brigade commanded by Brigadier-General P.D. Jeffreys: 1st Bn. East Kent Regiment; 21st Punjab Infantry; Guides Infantry.

Divisional troops: 10th Field Battery, Royal Artillery; No. 7 Mountain Battery, Royal Artillery; No. 8 (Bengal) Mountain Battery; 10th Bengal Lancers (1 squadron); guides Cavalry; 2nd Bn. Highland Light Infantry; 3rd Bombay Light Infantry, 6 companies; No. 4 Company, Bengal Sappers and Miners; No. 5 Company, Madras Sappers and Miners.

The campaign was planned in such a way as to force its way into Buner through three directions. One part of the troops was sent via Pirsai, including the 31st Punjab Infantry, Guide Infantry and section of No. 4 Company, Bengal Sappers and Miners. The other force, consisting of three squadrons, 10th Bengal Lancers and two squadrons, Guide Cavalry, took its way through Rustam. The final force, comprising the remainder of the troops under the command of Brigadier-General Blood himself, moved to Sangawu, the headquarter of the expedition. Moreover, Nowshera became the Base Supply Depot, Mardan was a staging godown for 15 days' reserve supplies and Sangawu served as 'advance depot' containing 10 days' supplies for all the troops. Mule and camel transport was also in place for the campaign. Blood was to take control of the Tangay Pass while the other two forces together should secure Pirsai Pass. As all the passes had already been studied, the Tangay 'was selected as affording the most suitable route for the main advance.' It was estimated on 6 January that on the Tangay Pass around 1000 defenders under 27 banners had gathered. A similar number was also seen on Ambela and Malandarai while at Pirsai 40 or 50 persons had assembled (*Frontier and overseas expeditions from India* 1907: 313). In this way all the Buner valley was entered, visited and dominated.

Stein's observations

The importance of Aurel Stein's observations is obvious due to many reasons. He gives a date-wise description of the march in such a way as to illustrate the routes followed by the first Brigade he was accompanying. War tactics, including strategic points such as passes and others, have also been recorded. It is to be reiterated that Stein makes random references to these non-archaeological matters as the main purpose of his journey was archaeological reconnaissance.

On the routes followed

Aurel Stein left Nowshera on 5 January 1898 and reached on that very day to Katlang where General Blood's Division had stationed. The force moved, on 8 January, from here to Sangawu and took a defile to reach the Tangay Pass, 'the route for the advance into Bunér' (Stein 1898: 3).[1] The next point was Kingargalai around three km 'from the eastern foot of the pass' (p. 5) where the First Brigade reached on 9 January. General Meiklejohn's Brigade reached Juwar, in the NW of Kingargalai, on 10 January and the following day was spent here (p. 12). On 12 January Meiklejohn's column left Juwar for Torwarsak via 'the shortest route which lies in the valley drained by the Churrai [Chaŕai] stream' (p. 15) in order to meet General Blood who had also reached there (*Frontier and overseas expeditions from India* 1907: 317). It was followed by a march intended for Pacha on 13 January (p. 17). However, a halt at Bhai, around 3 km from Pacha, was made and the following day the force moved to Elai in the Barandu valley 'by the direct route leading along the Pádsháh stream' (p. 22). Back at Torwarsak the 'camp was broken up' and on 15 January Rega was reached through Dagar (pp. 24-25). A portion of the Brigade left on 16 January for Bajkata and the camp of Meiklejohn was established at Bar Kalay. The next day a greater part of the Brigade set out for entering 'into the Chamla Valley *en route* for the Ambéla Pass' (p. 41). The remainder troops at Bar Kalay left the camp on 18 January in order to join the 2nd Brigade which had already taken control at Chamla (p. 44). Chamla was evacuated on the following day (pp. 46-47) and different groups of forces left through Ambela for Mardan where finally 'the General Blood's Division broke up' (p. 51).[2]

On resistance

Primarily concerned with his archaeological reconnaissance, Stein also has recorded some developments in terms of war and resistance. His work presents some interesting aspects of local war tactics, strategically important points and British punitive policy. While at Sangawu, British territory, 'some "sniping" [happened] which was attributed by competent judges to "loyal" subjects of that neighbourhood' (p. 4). Were these really 'a few harmless shots' as *Frontier and overseas expeditions from India* (1907: 13), not unlike Stein, also mentions them? Recent research induces us to say a 'probably, yes'. We have come to know very well that the situation during the uprisings was not totally unseditious. From these marginal areas a series of complex responses had come forth. The imperial state was using 'the surveillance apparatus' in villages of the northern limits of the Peshawar district to stop people from going to participate in the resistance. Mian Khan and Sangawu, amongst others, were also vulnerable. Many persons were arrested and convicted from these areas immediately after the war (Nichols 2001: 230ff.). Strict control in place, the 'sniping' seems, no doubt, to be from the side of the friendly subjects.

[1] All references to Stein (1898) hereafter would be indicated just by using p./pp. followed by page number/s.

[2] Stein had been back on the British soil along the troops on 19 January. We do not know, at the moment, what exactly happened next to it. However, from his letter, dated January 25, 1898, from Swat, it becomes clear that from Mardan he would have moved back to Malakand. It seems certain when he in the same letter writes, 'You will be happy to know that I have returned to British soil. I could have used as many weeks as days in Buner. I am in no hurry to return to Lahore and shall spend four or five days here writing my report for the Archaeological Survey and have the maps drawn for it under my supervision' (quoted in Mirsky 1977: 73).

On 9 January, fighting took place on the Tangay Pass and it was taken in possession by British forces. Artillery was also used during the confrontation. Along the crest of the Tangay Pass were seen remains of an ancient fortification of rough masonry of which the outside buttressing wall measured about 20 ft. The Pass was garrisoned by Pukhtun combatants and was no less significant from a strategic point of view. Taking into consideration all this, Stein rightly remarks:

> The tribesmen holding the pass had raised one of their main sangars on this very platform. The gathering of standards I had noticed near this spot in the early part of the day showed that it had been considered important and held in force also by the most recent defenders of the pass. The absence of other traces of old fortification on the ridge is easily accounted for by its extreme narrowness and the steepness of the cliffs on its western face. These cliffs themselves would form a sufficiently strong line of defence against any enemy not armed with modern guns. On the Tangé [Tangay] Pass there was thus neither room nor need for such extensive fortifications as can still be traced in ruins of evidently ancient date on the Malakand and Sháhkót Passes (pp. 4-5).

Stein also refers to people's tactics of warfare throughout his work. He notes that at many places people had deserted their homes and villages. Kingargalai and other nearby villages had been abandoned and it was, in Stein's words, the occupation of the Tangay Pass which 'had apparently put all thought of open resistance to an end.' Negotiations, though, between the officials and *jargahs* continued in the meanwhile (p. 5). At another place he writes that the fall of the Tangay Pass had caused '[t]he whole population of the valley [near the Pass]' to flee along with the manageable number of cattle to save (p. 10). Similarly, at Juwar 'the population had not entirely fled, though all houses were appropriated for the accommodation of the troops' (p. 12). At Torwarsak there were few who had not left their homes. Pacha, 'the site of the holiest Muhammaden shrine in Bunér, the Ziárat of Pír Bába Sáhib', was selected for a visit by a column led by General Meiklejohn due to the very reason of its famed sacrality. The march of a part of the Brigade began on 13 January; however, no clashes took place here (pp. 17-18). Stein states:

> The large Jirgas of the Gadazai [Gadizi] tribe, which soon made their appearance before the Political Officer, showed that, notwithstanding rumours to the contrary, resistance was not to be expected at this sacred spot either. The troops were accordingly ordered to halt at Bhai, about two miles before Pádsháh, and to return to the main valley below Tursak [Torwarsak] on the day following (p. 19).

Another source states that on this occasion Muslim soldiers of the British force paid a visit to the shrine of Pir Baba (*Frontier and overseas expeditions from India* 1907: 217).

The forces then reached Rega and established their camp here on 15 January. The village was especially the target of operation due to the fact that Sartor Faqir belonged to it. According to Stein, he was the 'immediate cause' of the disturbance and crisis of 1897 'and the events that followed'. His house and the mosque he remained associated with 'were blown up and burned' on 16 January (p. 30). Here were also destroyed two towers of the *malaks* who had provided shelter to Sartor Faqir in the wake of his withdrawal from Swat (*Frontier and overseas expeditions from India* 1907: 318). The village of Takhtaband had been 'utterly deserted' (p. 41). The Brigade from its camp

at Bar Kalay, where it had been joined by the staff from the Sangawu headquarters, left for Ambela Pass in the Chamla valley. Eighteenth January was important as '. . . the remainder of the troops still in Bunér was under orders to retire over the so-called Bunér Pass and to join the 2nd Brigade which had in the meantime occupied the head of the Chamla Valley through the defile of Ambela' (p. 44). This prompt submission on the part of the Chamla people stopped further eastward move. January 19 was the day for 'the evacuation of Chamla' and withdrawal to the British area. They were then back in Mardan.

The troops were also accompanied by 'the 5th Company, Bengal [Madras] Sappers and Miners led by the Officer Commanding Royal Engineers' (p. 25), obviously for management and repair of roads and tracks.

Stein also records an interesting story about local war tactics. When on the Tangay Pass it was noticed:

> On the floor of the two front rooms . . . there were signs showing that stones and earth had recently been displaced. The Pathán sepoys of my escort, led by an instinct evidently due to experience, at once suspecting a hiding place. By removing the topmost stones and then digging down with their bayonets they soon opened two little wells sunk into the ground. They measured each about 5 feet square and were lined with old masonry down to the solid rock. They were found filled with grain and small household property which some neighbouring villagers had evidently deposited there in anticipation of our invasion (p. 9).

People's care for their cattle and animals also gets reflection in Stein's report. After the fall of Tangay Pass the fleeing people also managed to rescue some of their cattle to the hills. Similarly, Stein saw that in the Nanser area villagers were coming down so as to remove portable property they had left behind after receiving the first blow at Tangay Pass (pp. 10-11). Concerns for livestock and other valuables show how important these things were in relation to subsistence in the region.

Discussion and conclusion

Important insights are permitted by Stein's report about the popular, but contested, events of 1897 and 1898. The first point about the Buner Punitive Expedition is regarding the occupation date of the Tangay Pass. According to Stein it happened on 9 January 1898. However, another source says that 6 January was spent at Sangawu and the following day Pukhtun defenders of the Pass were made to flee to Kingargalai and thence to the hills (*Frontier and overseas expeditions from India* 1907: 313ff.)

Another point concerns the character of the resistance at the time. Robert Nichols has demonstrated how weak was the colonialist representation of the events as being driven by fanaticism. Similarly, futile has been the latter attempt to analyze the uprisings in millenarian terms. It has also been shown that the local, individual, clan and religious dynamics also repudiate the subaltern perspective of understanding domination and resistance in the strict sense of Manichean duality (Nichols 2001: 89-116). Examples from Buner also do not warrant dissimilar reflections. Evidence, both from Stein and from elsewhere, can show that there was no consistent and collective response to the punitive force. Even during the war days evidence in contrast to cohesive consciousness can be presented.

It is interesting to note that in the initial days of the operation, on 9 January, Salarzi and Asharzi (originally Ashezi) *jargahs* offered their submission in Kingargalai. In contrast to *en masse* submission rule, their offer was accepted in order to ensure the rear area security, as the forces were to make advance further in the valley. It also provided that the forces would make free movement and in return they would not harm the villages 'provided the tribesmen were not guilty of hostile behavior or misconduct.' Similar proclamations were made as the troops moved onward (*Frontier and overseas expeditions from India* 1907: 316). The *jargah* from Gadezi and its assurances that there was no possibility of resistance in Pacha also speaks about a divided rather than subaltern collective. A contemporary source also records that not all Bunerwals were part of the hordes of attackers. It notes:

> Reliable information was received that after a *jirga* [*jargah*] at Takht-a-band, the Bunerwals, with the Hindustani fanatics, together with men from Chamla and the Khuddu Khel and Jadun, started for Swat on the 9th [August 1897]. Two sections, however, of the Bunerwals had refused to join, so it was thought improbable that many Bunerwals would come down Chamla, as the valley leading to Umbeyla [Ambela] Pass is called (Mills 1897/1979: 74).

The date of the Takhtaband *jargah* is important as on that very day tribes around Chakdara and Thana had offered their submission.

All this demonstrates that a 'universal' sense of solidarity was hardly prevalent at the time. It has nuancedly been recently shown. '[. . . A]s the fighting ended and as interviews, interrogations, and inquiries accumulated into late 1897, it became clear that not all clans or villages along the northern border had joined the violence. Nor did colonial officials seem to care to implicate fully those individuals whose village or clan memberships made extended investigations impolitic and inconvenient to larger colonial purposes' (Nichols 2001: 232). It is pertinent to see Buner also as a sanctuary along with other independent areas. Fugitives, accused of being part of the attackers on Malakand and Chakdara forts, from the northern limits of the Peshawar district evaded British authorities here (Nichols 2001: 244). This is interesting if seen together with H.W. Mills observations on the occasion of the punitive expedition to Swat in late 1897. Buner was 'scanned' from Karakar as there was the possibility of future operations here 'unless the Bunerwal improves his way' (Mills 1897/1979: 86). Later on, in January 1898, a Buner *jargah* surrendered three wounded persons (Nichols, 2001).

Stein also reflects on the fall of Tangay Pass. He observes that the people had left any idea of open resistance. '[I]t seem[ed] if open resistance in Buner [. . . was] now over' and as Major Deane had predicted 'the population submitted at once'. The acceptance of submission may also be seen as part of the policy of power enactment. Stein says that the expedition was 'intended mainly to make a moral impression' (Mirsky 1977: 72). It would mean that colonialist power would act symbolically by obliterating any local symbols and traces of resistance. So was done with Sartor Faqir's house and the mosque at Rega. Before that, during the Ambela campaign, in 1863, setting fire to Malka was also a symbolic act (for Ambela see Olaf 1958/1985: 360-369).

Another point is that the Pir Baba *jargah*'s assurance about no possibility of resistance at the site shows that such places were held in great respect at that time. The premises of shrines were inviolable and sacrosanct. Hence, the colonialist forces abstained to get into Pir Baba. Contrarily, the

recent attack on the shrine by Taliban, in 2009, shows the extent to which change has occurred in the meantime (Khan 2009). Before that, in September 2007, a severe bomb blast also happened in the Pir Baba bazar, which damaged a number of shops and wounded two persons ('Pir Baba bazar main bomb ka khawfnak dhamaka' 2007). The sacrilegious act speaks volumes for the increasing penetration of puritanical considerations, in the context of majoritarian politics in South Asia, unlike the traditional understanding of religiosity and spirituality.

Local tactics of warfare also comes to the fore from Stein's observations. Hills served as sanctuaries which also permitted occasional visits to contiguous villages especially out of concern for cattle and other valuables. Running the risk of harm by descending from safe hills also points out how important the sources of subsistence were for the people. Furthermore, concealing foods during crisis times also hints to time-tested war tactics. Stein's analysis of the strategic character of the Tangay Pass and his comments of it being only prone to 'modern guns' are interesting. Being a historian and geographer, he could correctly assess the topographical significance of the area from a military point of view. It also shows how brittle local resistance was in the face of advancing colonialism.

Lastly, Stein has also seen the locals through the spectrum of European rationality. Sartor Faqir's 'fanatical preaching had been the immediate cause of last summer's rising in Lower Swat, the siege of Malakand, and the events that followed' (p. 30). The British construction of fanaticism has recently been demonstrated by many studies (David, 1989, 1996). It is argued that 'fanaticism served as the key trope of colonial frontier discourse.' Through it *local follies* embodied by resistance were rationalized (Nichols 2001). The Victorian mentality in Stein was also not less vulnerable than Churchill, Curzon etc. to such views about the local people.

References

Ahmad, A. S. (1976) *Millennium and Charisma among Pathans: A Critical Essay in Social Anthropology.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Caroe, O. (1958/1985) *The Pathans: 550 B.C.-A.D. 1957*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.

Edwards, D. B. (1989) Mad Mullahs and Englishmen: Discourse in the Colonial Encounter, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31 (4): 649-670.

Edwards, D. B. (1996) *Heroes of the Age: Moral Fault Lines on the Afghan Frontier*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Frontier and Overseas Expeditions from India. (1907) Vol. 1, *Tribes north of the Kabul River*. Compiled in the Intelligence Branch, Division of the Chief of the Staff, Army Headquarters, India, Simla: Government Monotype Press.

Khan, N. 2009. Taliban Rise Near Islamabad. *The Washington Times Daily*, (23 April), https://www.pressreader.com/usa/the-washington-times-daily/20090423/282080567777188 (accessed: 25 April 2017).

Khan, R. (2014) Beginning of Archaeology in Malakand-Swat (1896-1926): Protagonists, Fieldwork and the Legal Framework, Unpublished PhD Thesis, Taxila Institute of Asian Civilizations, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad.

Mills, H. W. (1897/1979) *The Pathan Revolts in North-West India*. Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications.

Mirsky, J. (1977) *Sir Aurel Stein: Archaeological Explorer*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Nichols, R. (2001) *Settling the Frontier: Land, Law, and Society in the Peshawar Valley, 1500-1900*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.

Perrett, B. (2007) *British Military History for Dummies*. Chichester: John & Wiley Sons, Ltd.

Pir Baba bazar main bomb ka khawfnak dhamaka. (2007) *Daily Azadi* (Swat), (16 September).

Stein, A. (1898) *Detailed Report of an Archaeological Tour with the Buner Field Force*. Lahore: The Punjab Government Press.

Sultan-i-Rome. (1994) The Sartor Faqir: Life and Struggle Against British Imperialism, *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society* XLII (I): 93-105.

Sultan-i-Rome. (1995) The Malakand *Jihad* (1897): An Unsuccessful Attempt to Oust the British from Malakand & Chakdara, *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society* XLIII (I): 171-186.

Received: Jan 22, 2019
Revisions Received: June 18, 2019