

Free Thoughts

Painda Khan

with Peghla Khan, Hewad Khan Shalamkhel, Omid Khan, Meena Khan,
Atal Ahmadzai, Oishika Neogi, and Barry Rodrigue

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Just over a dozen years ago, Barry Rodrigue heard about a poet and teacher in Afghanistan, named Painda Khan, from his son [Hewad] and his future son-in-law [Atal], who were students in North America.¹ Professor Khan was described as a highly principled and inspirational educator, one who stood for free-thought in Afghanistan's communities and classrooms. He encouraged critical thinking, independent from dogmas of all kinds.

At that time, Barry and others were in the midst of founding the International Big History Association (2010) and were facing challenges from entrenched disciplines and administrators in universities around the world. While the IBHA struggle was not devastating as that in the Afghan countryside, these separate struggles for free thought quietly intertwined in Barry's mind. When he came to India, seven years later, to help set-up South Asia's first university program in Big History, he learned that Prof. Khan and his family had settled in Delhi.

One of his students [Oishika] had just finished an internship in Big History and Peace Studies at J.F. Oberlin University in Tokyo and begun work with NGOs in Delhi, so he asked her to visit Prof. Khan.

Prof. Khan and his daughter Peghla met with Oishika in Delhi in August 2020. They discussed their coming together in a park, along with a beautiful song that Prof. Khan had composed in the ancient *Landai* form of lyric



Figure 1: Painda Khan (right) and Oishika Neogi (left), Delhi, 26 August 2020. Photograph by Peghla Khan.

poetry of the Pashto language.² Although addressed to the Mullahs [Islamic clerics] of Afghanistan, it is a universal call for freedom of thought and expression.

The poem is composed in the traditional *Landai* style of Afghan poetry, which is a brief couplet (sometimes joined together with others) to poignantly share affection, home, dissidence, or joy. Popular and often sung, *Landai* are also called *tapi* [healing], as they are said to give comfort.³ While translation into another language cannot convey the beauty and depth of emotion, we offer a translation into English by Peghla Khan. We also share a recitation by Peghla and its singing by Prof. Khan at: <<http://www.rodrigue-global.org/painda-khan.html>>.

Free Thoughts

There is a saying that Pashtuns seek revenge even
after 100 years,
but I am saying that they do not take revenge, they
forgive easily.

Pashtuns quickly show their anger, while they hide
their compassion.
They do not seek revenge from others.

Pashtuns did not take their revenge from Genghis
Khan, or from the British,
Pakistan's army have been killing Pashtuns, but
they did not seek revenge.⁴

Through time, when a hundred years pass, onetime
friends become enemies, while a hundred years
ago, enemies now are friends. Who then will
seek revenge from whom?

Pashtuns, you should drop these unsubstantiated
and boastful claims.
Remember, greatness comes with knowledge.

You have to make this lesson understandable and
clear for the Mullahs;

They should seek all kinds of knowledge (not only religious).

Otherwise there won't be any progress.
Men and women both should strive to gain all sorts of education.

While Mullahs say that to seek knowledge is a divine command for both male and female,
They damage and destroy educational institutions and create chaos and suffering for others.

Why does an uneducated Mullah not realize this?
Knowledge has reached a high level, but they do not care and do not want it.

It is not the Mullahs' business if the people want to know about God or not.
They can enjoy heaven and contemplate heaven, but the people do not care about it.

Mullahs mislead Pashtuns.
They are the ones who prevent Pashtuns from seeking knowledge.

If someone is not educated, what is their respect and value?
The Mullahs are working day and night to prevent Pashtuns from gaining knowledge.

The Mullah's are destroying and ruining educational institutions.
They are killing teachers and professors.

Pashtuns have been accused of many wrongs.
They are not terrorists, but they are victims of terrorism.

Dear Mullah, do not be an obstacle to knowledge and prevent people from getting education.
God will take away his blessings from those who are against knowledge and education.

[Poem Recited by PeghlaKhan](#)

[Song Version](#)

که سل کاله تېر پښتون خپل بدل اخلي
زه وایم ژر یې بڼې هېڅ بدل نه اخلي
خپل غوسه پډاګوی او رحم پټوي نو
نه بدل نه انتقام له چا څخه اخلي
نه چنگیز باندې داره نه په انګریز
پنجاب تل پښتون وژلي بدل نه اخلي
که سل کاله تیر دوست دښمن او دښمن دوست شي
دا بدل او انتقام به څوک اخلي
دا بی خایه باټې پریردی پښتو
که څوک علم زدکړي ښه بلاس اخلي
د ښه والي راز همدغه زدکړه او علم
ملا پوه کړي هر علم پلاس کې واخلي
لډې پرته د بریا چانسونه لگ دي
ښځه او نر یو خای هر علم پلاس واخلي
ملا وایي علم فرض په نر او ښځو
بیا د علم مرکز سوري غم را واخلي
دا بی علمه ملا ولي نه پوهېږي
تر آسمان علم ختلی دایې نه اخلي
خدای پیژني که نه ستا یې پرې څه
ته مزې کوه جنت کی دی یې نه اخلي
د پښتون لار دغه ملا پرې ورکه کړي
دا د علم تېر ده علم ترې اخلي
که په چا کې علم نه څه یې عزت وي
شپه او ورځ له پښتو څخه علم اخلي
چې مرکز د علم سوزي پوهي ضد شو
د مکتب او پوهنتون استاد ترې اخلي
هر تهمت هر ناروا پښتو شي
تروریزم پښتون نه پښتون ترې اخلي
ملا جانه علم مخپته خند نه شي
علم ضد وي خدای خپل ښګڼې اخلي

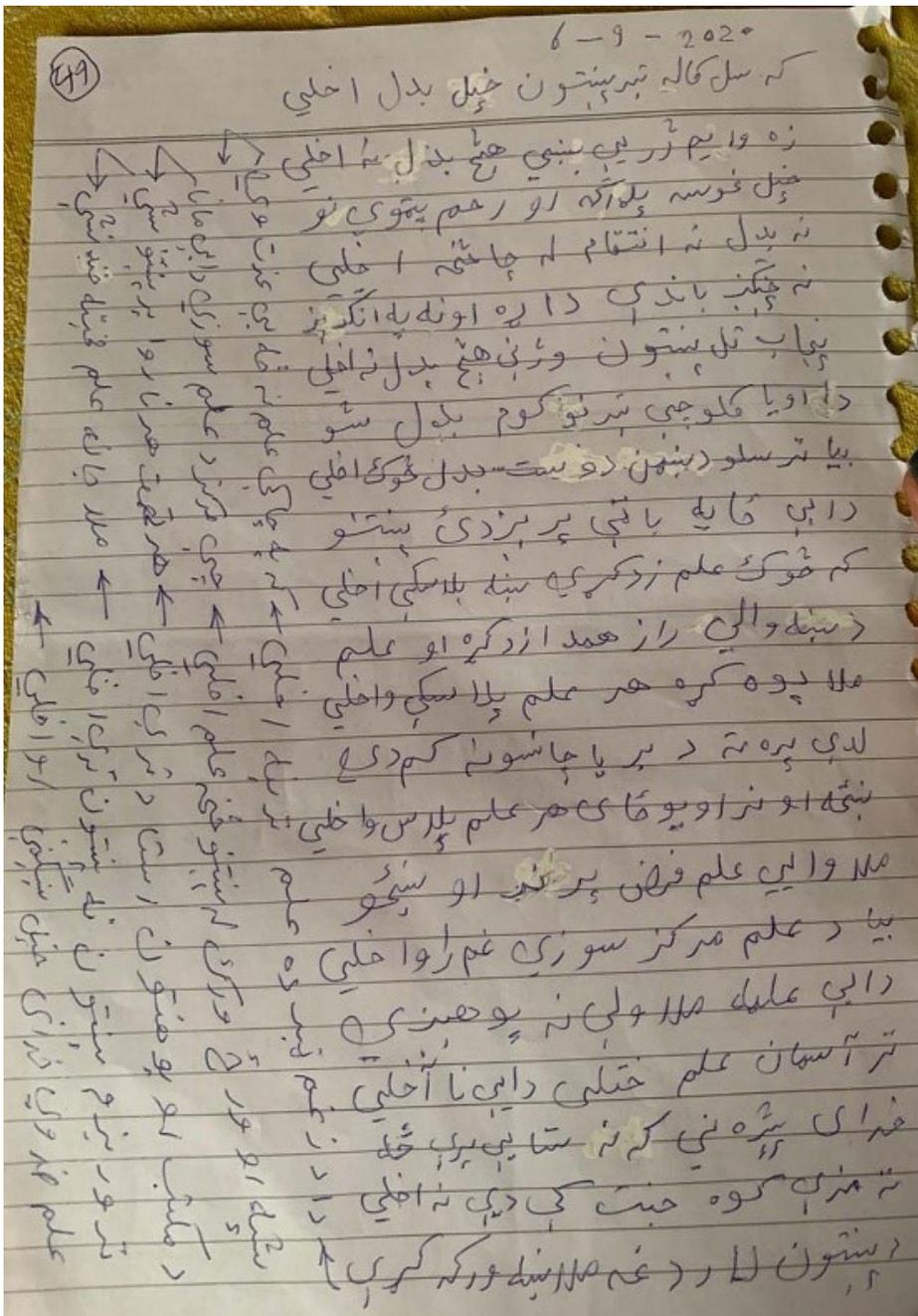


Figure 2: Professor Khan's poem, in Pashto, written in his own hand (above). On the previous page is its formal transcription in Pashto by his son, Omid.

As Prof. Khan notes:

This is the ancient Landai kind of poem. It's beautiful and it's universal. Nowhere in this poem do I say that 'it's mine.' It's everybody's. This is like a shared experience for all Afghans.⁵

will be captives of myth. This is the down-to-earth message of Painda Khan's poetry.

Such universal connectivity is an important part of Big History, where humanity is often addressed as a holistic worldwide experience. As big-historian David Christian framed it, we need to develop 'the ability to assess claims of universal standards yet [remain] aware of human commonalities and differences; putting culturally diverse ideas and values in historical context, not suspending judgment but developing understanding.'⁶

From Nagaland (Northeast India), professor and poet Theyiesinuo Keditso writes how folklore's connections to society 'direct us towards social action based on empathy and an awareness that all actions have consequences beyond the individual and even beyond the human.' Then, like Prof. Khan, she shares two of her own poems to illustrate this concern. As she concludes: 'I propose that folklore needs to be brought back into the sphere of the political and be reinstated as a frame of reference through which we can engage contemporary challenges.'⁷

Other big-historians engage in the use of culture and the creative process to encourage free thoughts and free thinking around the world. This big-history expression has especially occurred in conflicted areas, such as Sada Mire's archaeological recovery of women's heritage in Somaliland, Magomedhhan Magomedhhanov's ethnographic revival of textile art in Dagestan, and Iles Tataev's social expositions with sculpture in Chechnya.⁸

Without free thought and education, the cosmos will remain imaginary, and we

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Endnotes

1. The text author is Barry Rodrigue. He met with Atal Ahmadzai and Hewad Khan, who first shared their close experiences about Prof. Khan as a family man and an inspirational teacher.
2. Painda Khan interview with Oishika Neogi, trans. Peghla Khan, Delhi, 26 August 2020.
3. Each *Landai* consists of a single, twenty-two syllable couplet. There are nine syllables in the first line and thirteen syllables in the second. In Pashto, the poem ends on a 'ma' or 'na' sound, but the lines do not generally rhyme. Daud 2017. Zaheer 2023. Professor Zaheer's article also addresses similar issues as those in Prof. Khan's poem and interview.
4. Panjab refers to Pakistan's intelligence agency, ISI..
5. Khan 2020.
6. Christian 2005.
7. Keditsu 2023: 3,4.
8. Magomedkhanov and others 2016. Mire 2016. Khadzhimuradov and others 2016. Rodrigue 2022: 23–26.