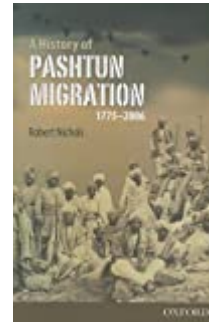




**Robert Nichols.** *A History of Pashtun Migration, 1775-2006*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. 350 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-547600-2.



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## Pashtun Migrants Everywhere, and Especially Now in the Gulf

Robert Nichols has written an overview of, as the title says, Pashtun migration. Nichols is a historian and has faithfully mined archives in India, Pakistan, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and many secondary sources to give us accounts of Pathans/Pashtuns here and there, including Australia, California, South Africa, and Suriname.

Nichols succeeds in showing that Pashtuns have been part of historical population flows, part of world history and not isolated from it, for centuries, but he is not so successful at showing the evolution of identity, the adaptations and shifts from the point of view of community members in the various historical and geographical contexts.

The coverage is basically chronological and reflects the sources, so that Pashtun identity is explored in the earlier chapters chiefly through British records. Nichols talks about military labor market regimes in Rohilkhand and Awadh and Hyderabad and then British India, and he shows a shift from use of the word "Rohilla" to "Pash-

tun" or "Pathan" by the end of the nineteenth century, but the reader is left unsure about what the migrants called or call themselves or what the subdivisions of Rohillas, Afghans, or Pathans were or are. Furthermore, the material is often confusingly presented without subheadings or clearly structured arguments, especially in the early chapters. Thus in chapter 2 information about the 1774 conquest of Rohilkhand by the Nawab of Awadh with British help and the 1776 internal crisis of Awadh is presented but not in good order and not linked to evolving Pashtun identities on the ground in any way. The sources for contextualized identities are too distant from the target population and give little insight into the answers being sought by Nichols, here and elsewhere in the book.

The very real strength of this book lies in the interviews Nichols conducted in Pakistan and the UAE in recent years. These interviews furnish material for his final two chapters, on Pashtun transnational circulation after 1950 and workers in Dubai in the last few decades. Here Nichols argues that Pashtun and other subordinated workers in the Gulf are struggling, in the early twenty-

first century, to break down the tight control of labor by the Gulf states. This is a major argument and I have not seen it put forward so forcefully elsewhere. The interviews with workers in the Gulf in their home villages in Pakistan, especially Rawail, and in the UAE deserve fuller exploration and better presentation than he has given them. If written up by an anthropologist, the interviews would have been fully discussed, so that we knew a great deal about the local setting, the range of participants, the interactions between interviewer and interviewees. And the interview material would have been separated from archival and contemporary written accounts instead of mixed in with written material, so that we could better appreciate the contributions from Pashtun voices. Some attention is given here to changes in gender roles because of migration patterns, but this topic is neglected in the earlier chapters; it is simply taken for granted that the migrants are chiefly male and no attention is given to

possible liaisons with local women in the different locations.

A diligent and adventurous historian, Nichols gives us much hard-won information, but this manuscript could have benefited greatly from rewriting to clarify the organization and argument of the various chapters. Oxford University Press editors or the outside reviewers of the manuscript could have helped, and I wonder if advice was given about the organization and presentation of the material Nichols has worked so very hard to gather. The book has not been well edited with respect to punctuation either, and it is hard to excuse the misspelling of Andhra as Andra (p. 205). Still, one looks forward to the project Nichols proposes to carry out in Karachi when conditions allow, and one encourages him to become even more of an anthropologist than he has already become!

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