

Roshaniya movement and the Khan Rebellion

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The Roshaniya, or “enlightened,” was a populist nonsectarian movement that arose among Afghan tribes in the mid-sixteenth century. Roshaniya was founded by Bayazid Ansari, who challenged inequality and social injustice practiced by the ruling powers. The Roshaniya promulgated egalitarian codes and tenets within Islam.

Born to an orthodox Muslim family, Ansari educated and instructed Afghans’ religious practices through a new radical teaching that questioned basic Islamic canons and propagated egalitarian and even communist principles. Ostracized by his family, Ansari spent several years wandering through the hills of Afghanistan disseminating this egalitarian ideology. In the ensuing years, Ansari’s teachings resonated among the Afghan tribes of Afridi, Orakzai, Khalil, Mohmand, and Bangash.

The ideology of egalitarianism broadly expanded the power of Ansari, who became widely known throughout Afghanistan as Pir-i Roshan (apostle of light), and his growing followers called themselves Roshaniya (enlightened). The rapid expansion of the Roshaniya movement alarmed Muslim clergy and the Moghul authorities. This official opposition deepened as Ansari’s influence expanded. He inveighed against the Moghul empire and mobilized partisans for armed struggle against the empire. Roshaniya defeated the Moghul army in a series of engagements in the mid- to late fifteenth century, establishing control over key cities and regions including Nangarhar, Ghazni, and Kabul. Adherents of the sect gained control of the Khyber Pass, which they blocked. While the Moghuls eventually defeated the Roshaniya movement militarily, pockets of resistance continued through the seventeenth century. In 1638, with the killing of Karimdad, Ansari’s grandson, the Roshaniya were defeated.

Khushhal Khan’s Rebellion against the Moghuls

Political and military instability continued to fester into the 1600s under the leadership of Khushhal Khan (1613–89), chief of the Khattak tribe and ruler of the Akora principality, which was a protectorate of the Great Moghuls’ empire. The Khattaks maintained strategic control over the vital transportation network in the Peshawar region and a high status in the Moghuls’ hierarchy. Their loyalty to the Moghuls was, however, volatile and the tribal settlements around Peshawar were always a source of turbulence. Suspected in the anti-Moghul activity, Khushhal Khan was arrested in 1664 and spent four years incarcerated in a Moghul fortress. Upon his release he began fervently rallying against the Moghuls. Using his eloquence and poetic gifts, he soon mobilized his tribesmen to start a guerilla war against Moghul rule. By 1675 he had more than 300,000 active supporters and won a series of skirmishes against the Moghul army. The Moghul emperor, Aurangzeb, pursued a strategy of sticks and carrots to foment tribal feuds and to split the rebellion. After some prominent chiefs left the movement, it gradually ebbed. Khushhal Khan died in 1689. His grandson Afzal, who inherited the Akora throne, recognized Moghul supremacy, although the Moghul influence in Khattak territory shrank and was merely nominal.

A prolific poet, Khushhal Khan is famous for his contribution to Pashtu literature and is one of the most revered figures in the Afghan cultural heritage.

SEE ALSO: Afghanistan, 1978 Revolution and Islamic Civil War; Afghanistan, Resistance to 19th-Century British Invasion; Bacha-i Sakkao’s Movement; Bin Laden, Osama (b. 1957) and al-Qaeda; Durrani Empire, Popular Protests, 1747–1823; Taliban, 1996–2007

References and Suggested Readings

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