

the version of the story summary

Ed by. A. Bharati. The Begue: Mawfow 1977

Suffering as a Religious Imperative in Afghanistan

ROBERT L. CANFIELD

An Old Man at a Shrine

In front of a famous shrine in central Afghanistan I encountered an old man, a Hazara (an underprivileged ethnic group), slumped against the trunk of a large tree, weeping. I discovered that he had come to this shrine from a great distance to obtain the healing of his only surviving son. In the city where he lived a doctor had told him that the child had an advanced case of tuberculosis and gave him no hope of recovery. So the man had brought the boy to this shrine, hoping that somehow God would work a miracle of healing. Instead, the boy had died.

Moreover, now that the boy was dead, the bereaved father was trapped here because of a bureaucratic technicality. His son's death had to be recorded, lest in a few years the government require him to produce his son for service in the army, but he had no money to pay a government clerk the customary tip to ensure registration of the death. Because he was obviously very poor none of the officials would take an interest in him. He was surviving for some days by staying with some relatives, and begging. The relatives were even poorer than he, he said, and anyway they were only distant relatives. Of his close kinsmen all were dead. He was alone.

The sufferings of this man were multiple. He was brokenhearted at the loss of his only surviving son. He was deprived of raising his progeny, something highly prized in this society, and consequently of any security in old age. Moreover, he was alone, without a close kinsman, no one permanently to live with, scarcely anyone on whom to

rely for succor and comfort, even less for social and economic security. And upon all this was compounded the insult of governmental insensitivity and petty corruption. He suffered the emotional shock of a loved one's death, the social loss of his future security and — the unable even to pay the fees for registering his son's death — the grinding humiliation of poverty.

This is a study of suffering in Afghanistan. It has been customary for anthropologists to study religion as essentially a cultural or ideological phenomenon. Anthropologists commonly have tried to show how a people's culturally conditioned interpretations of suffering direct them to certain forms of religious ritual and magical curing. For such an approach the variables that critically "explain" the diversity of religious forms are cultural. Spiro, for example, subtitled his book (1967) "a study in the explanation and reduction of suffering," but scarcely mentions the actual conditions of suffering in Burma. Similarly, Turner (1968) was not so concerned with the concrete circumstances of suffering among the Ndembu as with their cultural orientation toward their suffering.

This paper has a rather different focus. It points out the real conditions of suffering in order to suggest that suffering materially influences social relations. Cultural resources, i.e. systems of belief and ritual, provide the toolkit for dealing with suffering, but suffering itself, by its imperious presence in real life, makes these resources desperately important. To the peasants of Afghanistan suffering is a material condition strongly inducing them to seek efficacy through the religious and magical services provided by religious specialists; suffering, therefore, is one factor in maintaining a set of social relations. This of course is not a novel argument,¹ but it is presented as a reminder that to explain religious belief and practice we must not only look at cultural orientations but also at the actual conditions of distress inducing people to look for religious answers and to pay for religious services. Where we find people carrying on religious activities in earnest we are well advised to take note of stressful circumstances that may be incentives for religious observance. But suffering in other cultures must be looked for. If the forms through which suf-

fering is expressed among another people are unfamiliar, certain aspects of their suffering can evade us. It is easy to grasp that in our own society people in many walks of life have problems; ethnocentric notions may obscure our sensitivity to the kinds of burdens that people in other cultures bear. We are apt to suppose that if they do not complain as we do, they must not suffer as we do.

Another reason for this study of suffering as an impingement on social relations is that I want eventually to explain why religious leaders in Afghanistan, "mullahs," are so important. They are indeed very important. Many of them are relatively well off by Afghan standards and a few, the great "saints," are wealthy by anyone's standards. They are also influential. Religious leaders are everywhere highly esteemed, the most powerful of them being carefully respected by the Afghan government. This respect is not without reason: the power of mullahs was dramatically evinced in 1929 when an eminent saint in the country, eventually with the support of many other religious leaders, instigated a popular insurrection that overturned the ruling monarch.

Their influence has continued to be felt since then, though contained by police control. In 1958 when King Zahir Shah took measures to allow the veil to be removed from Afghan women, the secret police quietly rounded up key religious figures and imprisoned them for a time. Even so, despite four decades of growing government control of religious leaders and two decades of Western secular influence in Afghanistan, mullah influence has not declined. In fact, recently there has been a resurgence of religious fanaticism and a corresponding rise in the power of mullahs.

There have been large demonstrations of mullahs in Kabul, the most notable being against the use of a term of religious veneration for Lenin in a government newspaper. Also, there have been a number of xenophobic acts of violence, probably induced by religious fervor (cf. Dupree 1971a). And in the last national election persons associated with eminent mullahs and conservative religious interests seem to have gained in numbers at the expense of modernist-secularistic candidates (cf. Dupree 1971b). So a student of Afghanistan life and affairs has good reason to ask what the factors are that make religious personages important, why wealth flows to them, and why their opinions exert so much influence.

There are a number of factors involved, of course, but the one I can describe here is the suffering common to the populace. If there were space I would demonstrate that the sufferings of many people

¹ An inspiration for this view of suffering has been Max Weber (see Gerth and Mills 1958: 270-725). Belsaw (1967) presents a thorough and sympathetic description of economic hardships among the peasants of Fijl. I am grateful to Mary Farver for pointing out to me that while in Egypt, Elizabeth Fernea (1970), despite her educated distinclination, felt impelled by the urgent sickness of her child to accept and use an amulet.

in Afghanistan are so severe, so real, so inescapable that they are happy to pay dearly for the spiritual and emotional support provided by religious leaders. Here I can only present the data on their physical sufferings and economic distresses and affirm that they induce this effect.

PHYSICAL DISTRESS AND ITS PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Physical Infirmities

Until very recently descriptions of health conditions in Afghanistan were based on only impressionistic information. The most common serious diseases formerly were reported to be malaria and tuberculosis (Simmons 1954:173) but the World Health Organization has announced the eradication of malarial mosquitoes (Smith, et al. 1969: 104). Tuberculosis remains highly frequent. A tuberculin survey conducted in 1949 yielded a reaction rate of 85 percent in persons of twenty-three years or older, indicating a high incidence of tuberculosis exposure (Simmons 1954:173).

Simmons indicates that smallpox (of which there were 1,290 reported cases in 1951), measles, and whooping cough are endemic and occasionally reach epidemic proportions. He also indicated that "syphilis and gonorrhea are prevalent. . . . The highest rates of infection are encountered in Kabul and in the border towns, particularly in Herat and Jelalabad; the lowest in the central highlands" (1954: 174a). Cholera, typhoid, rabies, and typhus (*exanthematici*) also occur in high frequencies (Berke 1946). An immunological survey in 1967 revealed the incidence of positive poliovirus antibodies in children over five years of age to be more than 90 percent (Sery, et al. 1970). Moreover,

... undernutrition and avitaminosis are prevalent. Rickets is common among children of the poorer families in the cities and towns. Osteomalacia is frequently observed among the women. . . . Vitamin A deficiencies are prominent, especially in remote districts in the country and southern provinces. Minor manifestations of vitamin C deficiency are widely distributed. . . . Goiter is endemic in foci in the Amu Dariya river valley in the northeast (Simmons 1954:176).

While medical services have been improving, a growing body of solid statistics indicates that health conditions continue to be generally

Table 1. Most frequent conditions diagnosed in clinics of the Ministry of Health in selected areas of central Afghanistan (from MAP 1967)*

Conditions diagnosed:	In Obeý (Herat Prov.)	In Rukhsa-Panisher (Kapisa Prov.)	In Dehrahóod (Urozgan Prov.)	In Urozgan Prov.)
Total number patients seen	1,146	1,408	1,155	1,225
Gastrointestinal				
Number of patients	496	721	559	922
Percent of clinic	40.6	51	48.4	74
Ophthalmological				
Number of patients	236	272	158	140
Percent of clinic	20.6	18.4	13.8	11.2
Pulmonary				
Number of patients	165	103	131	88
Percent of clinic	14.4	6.9	11.4	7.2
Pulmonary and extrapulmonary TB				
Number of patients	86	29	53	56
Percent of clinic	7.5	1.9	4.6	4.6
Orthopedic				
Number of patients	147	205	144	155
Percent of clinic	12.8	14	12.5	14.4
Dermatological				
Number of patients	93	156	100	122
Percent of clinic	8.1	11.2	8.7	10

* Only the most frequent disease categories are reproduced here. The percentage figures indicate the percentage of persons having a disease in each category. Because a number of patients had more than one infirmity, there were more cases reported than patients examined, so the percentages never total 100 percent.

poor. Statistics from the 1967 and 1969 reports of the Medical Assistance Program (MAP), are indicated in Table 1. These are mainly based on personal histories and physical examinations done in field-clinic situations. (Worms, for example, were only diagnosed on the basis of their having been seen in stools; laboratory examinations would certainly have revealed a higher incidence of both intestinal parasites and tuberculosis.)

A high number of the diseases encountered were seriously debilitating: out of the five most prevalent diseases — i.e. intestinal parasites, trachoma, chronic pulmonary disease, bacillary and amoebic dysentery, and tuberculosis — all but the first seriously impair health (MAP 1969:7). Among the less frequent diseases not indicated in

Table 3. Incidence of ophthalmic diseases encountered in selected areas, in percent (from Barclay 1969)*

	Baghlan	Bost	Kandahar	Jalalabad
Trachoma	33	17	23	18
Leuconia	32	24	15	21
Cataract	14	14	11	19
Conjunctivitis (non specific)	7.5	11	9	11
Glaucoma	6.5	6	5	3
Absolute glaucoma	-	-	2.5	1.5
Trichiasis	5.5	5.5	9	0.7
Pannus	7.7	2.5	6.5	2.5

* For the same reasons as noted on Table 1, these percentages do not necessarily total 100.

Table 4. The mortality rates of children to five years of age in selected areas of Afghanistan (from MAP 1969)

Place and province	Number of women questioned	Total live births	Total now living	Percent Mortality
Mohamad-Dara (Nangarhar)	54	278	143	48.6
Kaja-Khogiana (Nangarhar)	42	216	122	45.6
Obey (Herat)	183	1,071	453	57.7
Rukha-Panjsher (Kapisa)	29	175	73	58.4
Debrahood (Urozgan)	76	475	264	44.5
Urozgan				
(Urozgan)	105	556	293	47.3
Chowki (Kunar)	147	684	416	39.4
Sharan (Kunar)	136	641	352	45.2
Total	772	4,096	2,116	48.4

lacking an understanding of anatomy and of the most elementary processes of physiology and disease, they seem not to know or perceive the natural causes for diseases and physical discomfort.

A lamentable consequence of this ignorance is the neglect of certain injuries that normally would be minor, but owing to improper care become serious. This is noticeably true of skin abrasions which are seldom washed clean, for soap is rarely used except to wash clothing, as it dries out the skin. A boy's leg, for example, which had

Table 1 were the following serious infirmities: acute and chronic otitis media (3.8 percent), tapeworm (3.1 percent), leprosy (2.1 percent), and osteomyelitis (1.9 percent) (MAP 1969:9). A leprosy survey in the schools of Hazarajat during the summer of 1969 yielded the number of leprosy cases in the districts indicated as shown in Table 2 (MAP 1969:16).

Table 2. Number of positive tests for leprosy among students in three districts

	Students	Positive tests
Yak Awalang	983	9
Panjaw	992	10
Lal-o-Sarjangan	716	2

A report on the sorts of ophthalmic diseases found in four areas of Afghanistan is summarized in Table 3.

Incidence of child mortality is high (see Table 4). In 1969 MAP published a four-year summary of the mortality and survival rates of children under five. Out of 18,854 children born to the 3,564 mothers interviewed, 9,565 were still living, indicating a mortality rate of 49.5 percent. In Hazarajat the mortality rate was 50.4 percent.

The Mystery of Infirmity

The above disease categories are of course our own, not those of the local populations. The persons suffering from these ailments have scarcely any sense of what is wrong with them. They typically describe their ailments only in general terms — as aches here and there, in the head, back, leg, side, etc. Also, they have little recollection of the history of their discomfort.

I met a man, for example, whose arm had been broken and remained unset; the broken part now flops loosely from his elbow. He said it had been very painful for a long time but eventually it began to feel better. He didn't know why he could no longer use it. A man blind in one eye told me he had no idea why it had become blind; he simply woke up one morning and noticed that he couldn't see out of it. (Being a farmer and illiterate, he probably did not strain his eyes sufficiently to notice that one eye was failing until it was almost gone.)

A man told me he had once washed his newborn child in the river — an icy mountain stream. For some reason, he said, it died soon afterwards; he supposed he shouldn't have washed it there. Thus,

been only slightly cut in a fall against a rock had become septic. A blister on a man's hand became badly infected and then was further infected by an unsanitary cowhide glove that was fitted on his hand to inhibit the swelling. By the time he received medical attention the swelling had crept up his whole arm. Had he not received massive injections of antibiotics, he would have faced the prospect of tetanus.

Ignorance of what is happening to their health often results in people feeling a pervasive anxiety. Fear of the unknown, a common experience, of course, is intensified by their insufficient medical understanding. The narrowness of their technological insights leaves relatively more room for disquietude. Owing to the greater extent of what is unknown, serious harm or illness seems to strike capriciously, with unaccountable severity and irregularity. The tendency therefore is to worry overmuch, to be on edge about relatively harmless misadventures of routine life.

A child in a Hazara family, an only surviving son, had fallen while running and apparently had injured his arm. The boy cried for several hours. A medical examination that evening, however, revealed that nothing was wrong with his arm. Evidently the boy's crying had resulted from his mother's emotional response to his fall: frightened by his fall, she had also cried, and this upset the boy. Having been told that there was nothing wrong, both the boy and the mother felt better, and both were quite well the next day.

Not only illness and injury but also death seems to strike wantonly and without warning. This has been especially so during epidemics. Twice in the living memory of these populations there have been epidemics which struck down persons by the scores. About twenty years ago an epidemic of scarlet fever² killed a number of persons. But while many were sick in most households, some families were struck more severely than others. In one household, for example, all but the mother were sick, but they all survived; in a neighboring family six persons died.

In 1915 cholera swept through the entire country with devastating effect; that year is now known as *saz-i-tarwan* [the year of judgment].³ But there was an unevenness in the distribution of the disease. For example, while many communities suffered badly, the Tajik community of Tolwaara, blessed with a pure spring, was scarcely affected.

² This is judged only by their descriptions of the symptoms. They called the disease *sarkhakaan* which is usually translated "measles," but probably refers to any rash-producing disease.

³ Jewett records the date precisely for us with the disease reaching Kabul in October 1915 (Bell 1948: 263), though informants could only estimate the date.

Nevertheless the value of the spring in protecting the community from the spread of the disease seems to have been overlooked; people feel that Tolwaara was protected supernaturally because it is surrounded by several shrines, two of which are famous for supernatural power. The apparent wantonness of death may be further illustrated by a

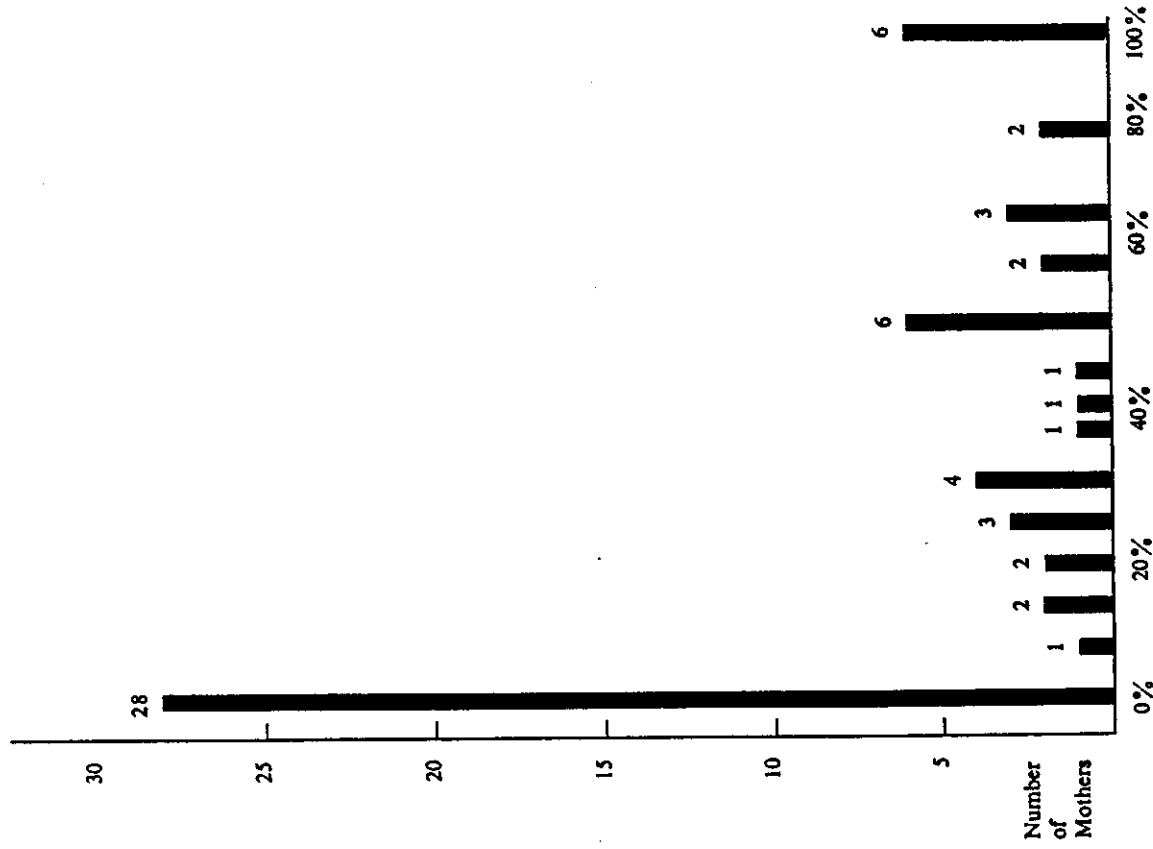


Figure 1. The percent mortality of children born to sixty-two mothers

close look at infant mortality rates in a community of 120 households.⁴ In this community I collected data on the birth and mortality of offspring from sixty-two women. These mothers bore 264 live children, an average of just over three per mother. Of the children born, eighty-eight had died before puberty,⁵ most of them before reaching five years of age, a mortality rate by the age of puberty of 33 percent.

Figure 1 indicates the relative success of the sixty-two mothers in bringing their children to puberty. Observe that there is a wide variation in child-rearing success, a number of mothers having lost no children and a number of others having lost all of their children. A third mode in the distribution of child mortality is in the middle range of roughly 50 percent child mortality in each household. Thus, the overall average of 33 percent child mortality is not distributed evenly, some mothers obviously being far more successful than others. It would clearly seem that some are more blessed than others.

That some people are blessed and some are not is an impression pervading not only matters of health but of social and economic success as well. Life is as inscrutable as death. Technological explanations being absent, supernatural considerations offer the most plausible means of understanding the irregularities of personal fortune (cf. Geertz 1965). In the strange caprice of supernatural powers, some people are fortunate, some are not. So a sense of mystery pervades all of life.

ECONOMIC DISTRESS

Visitors often observe that economic deprivation is less evident in Afghanistan than in many countries of Asia. Griffiths (1967:74) comments:

⁴ These data have a number of deficiencies. The census was complicated by the fact that most of my informants were men who do not remember these details as well as the women. Moreover, some were clearly not willing to give me this information and either reported no deaths, or denied some infant deaths already known to me through other sources. For these reasons, I have omitted data on some mothers, which, for various reasons, I felt were not trustworthy. As my data on child mortality are rather lower than those reported by MAP, I suspect the data are still somewhat skewed by these factors.

⁵ Informants sometimes found it difficult to recall ages of children. They preferred to use the terms *reza* [small, infantile] for infants, *xord* [little] for children under puberty, and *jawaan* [young, youthful] for those over puberty.

The great contrasts between wealth and poverty common to most underdeveloped countries are scarcely evident in Afghanistan. . . . The signs of disease are plentiful, but the emaciated limbs and swollen stomachs of severe malnutrition are rare. There is some begging, but not the persistent buzzing swarm of importunate human flies common to other Eastern countries.

This kind of observation, though true, should not obscure our perception of the hardships that do exist. We should not surmise that economic distress is not extensive. It is found wherever one looks closely; since Griffiths wrote the above, it has become much more evident. In the marginal agricultural areas, especially in the isolated valleys of the central highlands, poverty is found among peasant landowners; in the great agricultural centers it is found among tenant farmers; and in the cities it is found among day laborers.

Most of the poorest people in the country are Hazaras, an ethnic group distinguishable by Mongoloid features and, usually, Shiite faith (cf. Canfield 1973). The central highland region, from whence they come, is known as the Hazarajat. To illustrate the patterns of economic hardship the following paragraphs primarily describe problems of Hazaras and the Hazarajat, but this is not to imply that only they are poor. In fact, I want to use the Hazaras to argue that the greatest poverty is not in the rural districts — where admittedly it may be severe — but in the lowland plains where populations are more dense and more economically stratified. This generalization applies as much to the lowland territories of Farah, Herat, and Faizabad where few of the poor are Hazaras, as to Kabul, Ghazni, and Mazar-i-Sharif where most of them are. The phenomenon, of course, is not peculiar to Afghanistan.

Highland Peasants

In Afghanistan's diverse terrain there is a relationship between wealth and landownership in the central plains. Normally collecting heavy snows in winter, the mountains of central Afghanistan are the source of the country's great rivers — the Helmand, Hari, Morghab, Qunduz-Oxus, and Kabul rivers. In their flexuous pursuit of low ground these waters sometimes cascade through precipitous gorges, sometimes pause to wash tracts of alluvial plain. High on the mountain plateaus these plains are no more than narrow glens, but further down they become progressively wider and longer, and some, those at the confluence of the larger streams, serve as major centers of population

and wealth. On the fringe of the central highlands the important centers of agricultural abundance are Besud, Uruzgan, Panjlaw, Yak Awland, Bamian, and Doshi.

Further down, the waters debouch upon the broad, rich plains which are the great food baskets of the country: Kandahar, Girishk-Bost, Farah, Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif, Qunduz, Koh-Daman, Laghman-Nagarhar. Here in these expansive plains the economically successful, the socially well placed, and the politically strong have their lands. For, as the Afghan state rose to power, those in close relation to the rulership laid claim to the most lucrative territories and they enlarged and increased their lands and profits by investing in expensive irrigation works such as canals and *karez*s (see Humlum 1959).

Thus, the most expansive and rich plains are owned largely by the wealthiest and strongest families. Most of these families are Afghans (Pushtuns), but in the north many are Uzbeks; almost invariably, except for wealthy Shiites who have recently bought into these territories, they are Sunni Muslims. In the smaller agricultural plains of the central highlands, ownership of land also entails relative abundance. Often they are owned by Sunnis, but in some areas by well-to-do Shiites. In the highest valleys and glens, however, where the tracts of irrigable plain are narrow and ownership does not necessarily entail wealth, many of these landowners are poor; most are Shiites.

There is a general tendency for the fortunes of highland peasant cultivators to decline. One reason has been the pressure of Afghan nomads in the Hazarajat. As a reward for service in the defeat of the Hazaras at the end of the last century, Afghan nomads were invited by the Amir of Kabul, Abdul Rahman, to graze their flocks in the Hazarajat. This provided them opportunity also to sell at highly inflated prices goods obtained in the Indus valley, such as cloth, tea, sugar, and salt. These were sold on credit in the spring when the nomads migrated into the highlands, and were paid for in grain after the autumn harvest. When the nomads moved to the Indus lowlands to winter their flocks they replenished their stocks of goods by selling the grain.

Nomad power over the Hazaras for a time grew to oppressive proportions so that sometimes the peasants were forced to buy goods they did not want (Ferdinand 1962). Peasants told me that sometimes the cloth would be thrown into the house through the ventilation hole in the roof, with the demand that it must be paid for (with interest) the next fall. Fortunately, the government has recently taken a more favorable stance toward the peasant cause and such repressive prac-

tices seem no longer to continue. Peasant indebtedness, however, does; around 1960 as many as 60 to 80 percent of the Hazaras in some areas were in debt (Ferdinand 1962).

The fortunes of a highland peasant can also decline because of fortuitous events that upset the delicate balance of resources and labor that enables a peasant to subsist and prosper. An example is the case of Hosain Mamad. Hosain Mamad was at one time quite wealthy, for he was the son of a strong Mir. His land produced, it is said, as much as twenty *xarwars*⁶ of wheat, so he was one of the richest persons in his area. He had lots of animals, which helped to fertilize his land. Able to entertain many notables, he once fed several hundred guests when the saint of that area came to visit, an occasion that imparted to him much prestige. He spent his time supervising work on his land and in reading. Unfortunately he had no surviving sons who might have joined in the development and supervision of his economic resources, and only one daughter — a circumstance that eventually caused his good fortune to decline.

He adopted a son from a family having twelve children, but the boy turned out to be deaf and could not do much work. Also, he lost two wives and now has a third. Now in his old age, he has much less land because he had to sell some to purchase his wives. He has fewer animals, and because they provide much less manure for his fields, his land now produces only four or five *xarwars*. Too old to work it himself, he divides the yield half and half with a tenant worker, who, it is said, cheats him because he cannot supervise the work as he once did.

Another factor in the general decline of the highland peasants is the system of partible inheritance common to the Muslim world, whose dynamics are only now roughly understood (Wolf 1966:73-77). According to the requirements of Islamic law, land is divided among plural heirs, twice as much to a son as a daughter, so that no heir receives the entire estate on which the deceased subsisted. As the offspring multiply, after a few generations an heir may not receive a plot large enough for his own subsistence. In Afghanistan, land is so highly valued among the poor that the heirs try to hold the land in common, leaving it to one while the others emigrate. Even then it may not be sufficient.

For example, Khan Ali was a joint heir, with his brother and two

⁶ Estimates of land size are commonly expressed in terms of the amount of seed that can be profitably sown on it. A *xarwar* is 80 *ser* (Samin and Nielsen 1967). See also Note 7.

male cousins, to a piece of land inherited from his grandfather that was too small to support even one person. In 1967 all of the other co-owners had left the land in Khan Ali's care and found work in Kabul; the brother as a shopkeeper, one cousin as a hired hand, and the other as a driver. Their land consisted of four *ser*s⁷ of irrigated land, and a quarter *ser* of cultivable dry land; altogether it was worth about 10,000 afghanis (about \$250). Khan Ali had one bull, one donkey, and no sheep or goats. In spring 1967 he planted two *ser*s of wheat, two *ser*s of barley, and the rest in alfalfa. This, I judge from the yield of neighboring plots, would produce at least 1200 *paw*⁸ of grain.

As the residents calculate their monthly consumption needs to be a minimum of ninety *paw* of grain per person, his land would in a moderate year produce enough to last Khan Ali, if he consumed it all himself, over thirteen months. This assumes that none of the grain was sold for taxes, paid as debts, or claimed by any of the other three owners. Actually, however, all three of these liens on his yield existed, so that in order to remain viable his yield had to be considerably higher than the average in his area. Obviously he was close to the margin of viable subsistence.

Khan Ali lived alone. The high price of brides had denied him the privilege of a wife, though he was about forty years old. In summer 1967 he ran short of food and money and borrowed a little from neighbors to hold him until harvest. I asked him how he would repay the debt; he didn't know. The following spring he leased the land to a man from outside his valley to pay back his debts.

As the lessee had hired someone else to work the land, Khan Ali took a bus to Kabul. He planned to work as a coolie until he could get enough cash ahead to do something more profitable. Several factors contributed to Khan Ali's economic decline but the critical one was the size of the land left him by his father. The partible inheritance rule eventually carved the land into too small a fragment for it to support even one person.

The same rule, however, while impartially applied to all classes, has relatively little detrimental effect on the wealthy, for they have benefited more directly from the burgeoning economy in the cities. The growing numbers of heirs in the great families has enhanced, rather than weakened, their strength because as their offspring have increased, their involvement in national institutions has increased. They have dispersed into the many new positions in government, in-

dustry, and commerce that have become available as the nation modernized. These are the families that have gained most from foreign development.

The correct generalization seems to be that to remain viable a rural family must profitably articulate with the national cash economy. Some highland families have been able to do this — but only the rich ones. During the economic surge of the past twenty years these Hazaras have invested in small business activities and have profited greatly. Mir Ramzan Khan is an example.

Mir Ramzan Khan is the oldest surviving son of a formerly powerful Hazara Mir. Like his father, he attempts to mediate disputes among his neighbors and poorer friends, and when necessary he represents them to the government. For these services he receives many benefits, usually informal and unofficial. He is often paid in cash or grain by his clients and they also help him pay servants during plowing and harvest seasons, so he does little of his own work.

He and his younger brother have not yet divided the property they received from their father. It consists of forty *ser*s of land (i.e. ten times that of Khan Ali and his three co-owners), on which, in addition to the grain needed for their own consumption, they have planted a number of trees that in a few years will bring several thousand afghanis when sold in Kabul. In about 1965 they purchased a bus which carries both passengers and freight between Hazarajat and Kabul. They have also acquired a *saray*⁹ in Kabul which serves as a depot for the bus and its freight.

Mir Ramzan Khan lives on his natal land and in addition to his political activities oversees the cultivation of his land, while his younger brother supervises the bus business and the *saray* in Kabul. Unlike Khan Ali, Mir Ramzan Khan was able to stabilize his already strong position by investing in the national economic network. He and his brother are growing more wealthy.

While only the well-to-do can make such profitable investments, it seems likely that many of the rank-and-file highland peasants will become poorer. This is due to a fourth and more basic factor in the decline of the highland peasant, i.e. the general insufficiency of cultivable land. The scarcity of land in the Hazarajat is indicated in the rough data available on nutritional density.

The average amount of cultivated land per Hazarajat resident is 1.78 *jeribs* (about half an acre). The national average is 2.08 *jeribs*. Average amounts

⁷ A *ser* is 16 *paw*, which in English weight is 15 pounds.

⁸ See Notes 6 and 7.

⁹ An enclosed compound in the city, a caravansary.

of cultivated land per operator disclose an even greater discrepancy of 12.07 *feribs* for the nation at large (Jung 1970:9).

Because of the land scarcity, for more than a century highland peasants have been coming down to the lowlands and the cities during the winter to supplement their incomes (Burnes 1842:230). Usually they have returned in the spring, but those who obtained steady work have stayed, entrusting their land to relatives, some of them returning home briefly to help with the spring plowing and the autumn harvest. As a result, the summer population of the highlands has been greater than the winter population.

According to a research team that visited Hazarajat in 1968, perhaps as many as 30 to 50 percent of the highland labor force have been seasonally absent. Still, population pressure has not decreased: "Permanent migration does not offset the natural population growth with the result that the summertime population of the [central] region is increasing. Consequently landholdings are becoming smaller and the number of landless families is increasing" (Allen 1963: 2).

Rural Sharecroppers and Urban Day Laborers

The decline of the economic fortunes of the poor landowners eventually forces them, like Khan Ali in the case described earlier, to leave their land permanently. Even so, they are unlikely to sell it; commonly they rent it to a neighbor or mortgage it. Once pried off their land, they seek employment elsewhere. Most go to the cities, but some stay closer to home, moving to the nearer lowlands to work as tenant farmers for richer landowners. We shall examine this latter strategy first, using the Bamian valley as an example.

Bamian is a basin-shaped valley in Hazarajat at an altitude of about 6,000 feet surrounded by mountain ridges that reach 16,000 feet. The contracts of tenant sharecroppers in Bamian's lowlands suggest that their incomes are less than those of many peasant cultivators in the highlands, for there is a rough gradation from lowland to highland in the shares paid to tenants and hired workers. In 1968, with the landlord providing the seed, oxen, and other equipment,¹⁶ share-

¹⁶ Most published reports on tenancy contracts indicate that the tenant receives "one-fifth of the crop if he provides nothing but labor. If he also supplies implements, his share is one-fourth, and if he has draft animals, he gets one-third" (Smith et al. 1969: 250). This apparently is the case in some major agricultural regions, but even there, the arrangements are probably more flexible.

croppers working in the most valuable lowlands received one-seventh or one-sixth of the crop; those who worked somewhat away from the central plain received one-fifth, those further out and higher up on the slopes of the mountain one-fourth, others somewhat higher one-third, and those in the highest glens of the basin one-half.

The one-half contracts were different in that the worker provided his own oxen and equipment. Also, other considerations besides geographic location affected the arrangements, such as the amount of land worked by the hired hand, the kind of crop, whether other provisions are made for him (such as a strip of land whose yield is entirely his), and the like. Still, the gradation suggests the relative severity of the sharecropping contracts in different places: the lower the lands, the less the share of the tenant.

These data suggest that the peasants who still viably subsist in the highlands are better off than those who have left and acquired work as sharecroppers elsewhere. The matter needs additional research, but however accurate for lowland sharecroppers, the argument seems incontestably true for migrants who have moved to the cities.

They have come because there were more jobs than in their natal valleys, but recently they have been finding that there is a surfeit of workers like themselves to fill those jobs. The vast majority of them are impoverished. This, except for the boom years of the fifties and sixties, has been the common pattern: most Hazaras coming to the cities have been miserably poor. In general, the poverty of the Hazaras has been most severe, not in the distant highlands, but in the cities. The poorest Hazara landowners are found in the highest lands, but the poorest Hazara workers are found in the urban centers.

In competition for work in the cities, they contract to work for relatively little. That the competition of these migrant laborers for work reduces their wages is indicated by the fluctuation of wages in the cities according to their seasonal influx from the central highlands. Daily wages in Baghlan fall from 30 afghanis in summer to 20 in winter; in Mazar-i-Sharif from 50 afghanis in summer to 25-30 in winter; in Bost from 25 afghanis in summer to 18 in winter (Smith et al. 1969: 303). At these rates, assuming 300 paid days per year (which for most is much too high), a year-round day laborer would annually receive around 8,000 afghanis (about \$110) in Baghlan, 12,000 afghanis (about \$165) in Mazar-i-Sharif, and 6,000 afghanis (about \$80) in Bost.

Formerly, when they migrated to the cities, people used to find good jobs. During the fifties and early sixties, when the cities were

prospering from massive injections of foreign aid, many Hazara peasants in quest of opportunity rented out their lands to neighbors and moved to the cities. Thus, an important factor in the large Hazara out-migration during that period was the "pull" of outside economic opportunity. More recently, however, fewer of them have been willing to leave; as already noted, those who do so are compelled by straitened circumstances. So, in more recent years it has been due to the "push" of economic difficulties at home. Jung (1970: 11) argues from census data on migrants to Kabul from all regions that "push" factors predominate:

When asked the reason for their migration to the city, 20 percent stated insufficient land; 23 percent meager income; 8 percent unemployment; and 12 percent insufficient employment.

The efflux from the Hazarajat has been accelerating. When Khan Ali left his land and journeyed to Kabul he was not alone. The bus was jammed with dozens of other men like himself, some of them so poor that upon arrival they lacked even the half afghani (half cent) necessary to ride a city bus across town to reach a relative's home. On the basis of Russian estimates and the Greater Kabul Census, Jung (1970) estimates that from 1954 to 1961 an average of 7,600 people per year immigrated to Kabul from all provinces, with the number rising abruptly since then — to 12,000 in 1962, for example, and to nearly 20,000 in 1965. Of these, 31 percent came from the central provinces. By 1969 about 40,000 persons had recently emigrated from the central provinces. Of these 48 percent had been in Kabul for more than five years, 36 percent for one to four years, and 12 percent for less than one year — that is, almost half had been in Kabul for less than five years (Jung 1970: 7). One Hazara clan lived until about fifteen years ago entirely in the central highlands, but today 70 (i.e. 60 percent) of its 114 households live in Kabul.

Most of the Hazara migrants are permanently residing in Kabul, but many of them work only as day laborers and are often without employment. A recent phenomenon in Kabul has been the groups of unemployed Hazara men in the early mornings at central locations where people needing laborers may find them. These are Kabul's poor. In 1968 their services were available at 30 to 50 afghanis per day; few worked every day.

The pull of the cities was strong when the national economy was flourishing but since 1967 it has been faltering, bringing down even further the fortunes of the poor. The main reason for the decline

of the national economy, of course, has been the reduction of foreign aid. From 1960 to 1967 annual amounts of foreign aid to the country approached 100,000,000 dollars, but since 1967, despite increased aid from the People's Republic of China, this figure has dropped sharply — to 69,050,000 in 1967-68, to 50,200,000 in 1968-69, and to 44,210,000 in 1969-70 (Newell 1972: 144). The drop in foreign aid has especially affected the Hazaras who were favored by the foreign populations as domestic help. Hundreds of these are now without jobs. Moreover, inflation has continued; the price of wheat per *ser* (a common measure of the economy) rose from 20-25 afghanis in 1960 to 60 afghanis in 1968.

Since 1967 a natural calamity has greatly intensified the suffering. The snow on which Afghan agriculture depends for irrigation water in summer was for three successive years unseasonably light, resulting in one of the severest famines in Afghan history. In the summer of 1972, though a heavier snowfall augured for a better crop, the famine was so severe that in the north riots broke out as farmers demanded food for their families. According to the *New York Times*, November 14, 1972, estimates of the number of deaths reached 80,000.¹¹

Meanwhile, uncounted numbers have fled the famine areas to the cities, forming new shanty districts. An informal survey of these people in Kabul revealed that perhaps as many as one-third of their families had perished that year (personal communication). The famine crisis is of course a major calamity, hopefully only temporary, but it is merely an intensified form of hardship already familiar to the poor. For many, economic hardship is today an endemic condition.

The trajectory of the highland peasant, if he is not rich, seems to be downhill. Now the whole economy sags and his prospects seem even worse. Perhaps this is the reason for the concomitant rise in religious fervor in Afghanistan. Even after twenty years of Western secular influence, in Afghanistan the ancient bond between hardship and religion remains vigorous.

CONCLUSION

For the physically afflicted and poor, suffering and hardship belong to the world of real things. Suffering is a material condition with

¹¹ Some observers feared that during the winter of 1973 as many as 200,000 would die (*U.S. News and World Report*, November 6, 1972). According to personal sources, this figure was much too high. (See also *Afghanisthan Council* 1973.)

which the infirm and the hungry must deal. They must deal with it as they must cope with aridity or heavy snowfalls, government officers or local landlords, the price of wheat or the cost of hired labor. Like each of these circumstances, suffering raises issues — i.e. poses problems and perhaps offers opportunities — which must be coped with or exploited as part of the on-going process of maintaining survival and a degree of comfort and security.

Thus, for the afflicted and poor, religion is not simply a matter of beliefs, customs, and rituals, but it is also essentially one of material efficacy. The services of religious specialists are valued not just because the common people are socialized to value them, as mere cherished traditions of their ancestors, but primarily because their problems constrain them to demand these services. Amid their dilemmas they are willing to pay dearly to obtain a measure of relief — perhaps even deliverance — through the services of their religious leaders. Their sufferings convert their desire for a meaningful existence — a universal concern — into a social force, the pursuit of immediate and substantial efficacy. The need for power to exert influence on social and material exigencies is the mainspring of religious practice and one of the bases for the influence and wealth of Afghan religious leadership. This is what brought an aging man and his dying only son, at the price of their last farthing, to the door of a notable shrine. For the shrine was reputed to have efficacious power, power as specific to the infirmity as streptomycin.

The shrine's failure to deliver shattered an old man's world. Unfortunately I know nothing of what became of him, for he was soon gone — chased away by onlookers who were embarrassed that a foreigner had discovered his plight. One can only imagine how he might have picked up the pieces of his life. But to do this one would need to examine the cultural heritage that both "explained" to him his suffering and offered him a fresh hope, and that will have to be another study.

REFERENCES

- AFGHANISTAN COUNCIL OF THE ASIA SOCIETY
 1973 *Newsletter*, January 1973. New York.
 ALLEN, P. H.
 1963 "Report on Hazarajat trip." Mimeograph. Kabul, Afghanistan: Agency for International Development.

- BARCLAY, A.
 1969 Developing ophthalmic treatment in Afghanistan. *Transactions of the Ophthalmological Society, United Kingdom* 89:591-600.
- BELL, M. J.
 1948 *An American engineer in Afghanistan*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press.
- BELSHAW, C.
 1967 *Under the ivy tree*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- BERKE, Z.
 1946 Public health and hygiene in Afghanistan. *Afghanistana* 1:1-18.
- BURNES, A.
 1842 *Cabool: a personal narrative of a journey to, and residence in that city in the years 1836, 1837, and 1838*. London: John Murray.
- CANFIELD, R. L.
 1973 *Faction and conversion: religious alignments in the Hindu Kush*. Anthropological Papers of the Museum of Anthropology 50. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- DUPREE, L.
 1971a *A note on Afghanistan: 1971*. American Universities Field Staff Reports, South Asia Series 15(2). Hanover, New Hampshire.
 1971b *Comparative profiles of recent parliaments in Afghanistan*. American Universities Field Staff Reports, South Asia Series 15(4). Hanover, New Hampshire.
- FERDINAND, K.
 1962 Nomadic expansion and commerce in central Afghanistan. sketch of some modern trends. *Folk* 4:123-159.
- FERNEA, E.
 1970 *A view of the Nile: story of an American family in Egypt*. Garden City: Doubleday.
- GERTZ, C.
 1965 "Religion as a cultural system," in *Anthropological approaches to the study of religion*. Edited by Michael Banton. London: Tavistock.
- GERTH, H. H., C. R. MILLS
 1958 *From Max Weber: essays in sociology*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- GRIFFITHS, M.
 1967 *Afghanistan*. London: Praeger.
- HUMLUM, J.
 1959 *La géographie de l'Afghanistan*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal.
- JUNG, C. L.
 1970 *Some observations on the patterns and processes of rural-urban migrations in Kabul*. The Afghanistan Council of the Asia Society, Occasional Paper 2. New York.
- MEDICAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM
 1967 *Annual Report*. Kabul: Ministry of Health of the Royal Government of Afghanistan.

- 1969 *Annual Report*. Kabul: Ministry of Health of the Royal Government of Afghanistan.
- NEWELL, R. S.
1972 *The politics of Afghanistan*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- SAMEN, A. Q., G. A. NIELSEN
1967 *Conversion factors for agriculturalists of Afghanistan*. Faculty of Agriculture Research Note 2. Kabul, Afghanistan: University of Kabul.
- SERY, V., O. THRAENHART, K. ZACCK, S. BROOGER, A. OMAR, A. SABOR
1970 Basis for poliomyelitis surveillance in Kabul city. *Zentralblatt für Bakteriologie, Parasitenkunde, Infektionskrankheiten und Hygiene. Abteilung originale medizinisch-hygienische Bakteriologie, Virusforschung und Parasitenkunde* 221:311-318.
- SIMMONS, J. S.
1954 *Global epidemiology, a geography of disease and sanitation*, volume three. Philadelphia: Lippincott.
- SMITH, H. H., D. W. BERNIER, F. M. BUNGE, F. C. TINTZ, R. SHINN, S. TELEKI
1969 *Area handbook for Afghanistan*. Washington: U. S. Government Printing Office.
- SPIRO, M. E.
1967 *Burmese supernaturalism: a study in the explanation and reduction of suffering*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
- TURNER, V. W.
1968 *The drums of affliction: a study of religious processes among the Ndembu of Zambia*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- WOLF, E.
1966 *Peasants*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.