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Tribal wars, tales and tombs



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Monuments reflect public identity and the political power of many tribes in Sindh who actively participated in tribal affairs on one hand and state affairs on the other. Some tribes were so powerful that sometimes rulers needed their help to invade foreign lands. In order to subdue the power of some tribal chiefs, the perceptive rulers of Sindh engaged them against one another. Many tribal battles are recorded in the annals of Sindh's past. Some battles were fought in Balochistan in which Sindhi tribes played a significant role.

During the Talpur reign, tribal battles were on a surge. When any tribal chief did not have his due share in resource distribution, he also rose to rebellion. Even those part of the Talpur government also fought for resources. One such tribal melee took place between two powerful tribes – the Nuhanis and Bhurgaris in 1212 AH/1797 AD. Both were part of the Talpur government and were bestowed with jagirs. Despite vast land holdings by both tribes, acrimony between the two tribes could not be ended by the Talpur rulers.



Crumbling graves of the Bhurgari tribe

In the annals of Sindh, first a skirmish occurred between the Jamalis and Nuhanis with the latter overpowering the former. In every encounter, the Jamalis were defeated by the Nuhanis. Not seeing any sign of triumph over their enemies, the Jamalis went to get help from the chief of the Bhurgaris, Jehan Khan Bhurgari, who was the most powerful chief in the then Hyderabad region. He was also paternal uncle of one of the ruling Mirs of Hyderabad. Intoxicated in the power that he enjoyed in Talpur government, he decided to chastise the Nuhanis. The Nuhanis were also in the Talpur government headed by Ramin Nuhan. One night the Nuhanis were ambushed by the Bhurgaris, killing their tribesmen on the spot and thus infuriating the Nuhanis – who were now directly pointing guns at the Bhurgaris. After a few brawls between both tribes, the Talpur rulers of Hyderabad

intervened but it went in vain when the Nuhanis under their tribal chief Ramin decided to settle scores with Bhurgaris once and for all. After a well-thought-out planning phase, the Nuhanis attacked Tando Jehan Khan, the stronghold and seat of power of Jehan Khan Bhurgari. The fight lasted for several hours, inflicting many casualties of Bhurgaris. This affray also resulted in the killings of Jehan Khan Bhurgari and other notables of the tribe. Tando Jehan Khan village was completely razed to rubble by the Nuhanis. The Bhurgaris also killed a few Nuhanis. This incident took place in 1212 AH/1797.

Nearby brick kilns have also damaged the site. The brick makers are taking clay from the site of the graveyard

Those Bhurgaris who were killed in combat were buried near Tando Jehan Khan village, which is locally known as *Shaheedan Jo Muqam* – “the graveyard of martyrs”. This cemetery is located 2 km east of Tando Hyder in Hyderabad district. The Nuhanis who died in the encounter were buried in the Nuhanis graveyard, which lies 6 km west of Digri town in Mirpurkhas district.

There are 15 stone-carved graves in the necropolis, all belonging to the Bhurgari tribe. All are inscribed graves. There are three stone carved platforms in the cemetery on which are found carved cenotaphs. All of these are in a pathetic condition. The eastern platform is the largest in the necropolis which contained the graves of those who died in fight with the Nuhanis. Unfortunately, all six gravestones have now been dislodged and are lying northeast of the platform, partially buried in the sand. The graves bear the names of the deceased: “Jehan Khan Bhurgari, Darya Khan Bhurgari son of Muhammad Khan, Rustam Khan Bhurgari, Juma Khan Bhurgari, Abdullah Khan Bhurgari, and Ghulam Hussain Bhurgari.” To the south of these graves is a platform which contains the grave of Hassan Khan Bhurgari, who also died in the tribal battle. All the graves bear the date 15th Muharram 1212 AH /10 July 1797 AD. All the graves are richly engraved with the Kalima Tayyibah on northern side and inscriptions on the southern sides of each grave. The entire surfaces of the graves are engraved with Quranic verses – a fine example of Arabic calligraphy is seen on these graves of tribal chiefs in bucolic areas of Sindh, reflecting how devoted they were to their religion. It also shows the mastery over calligraphy by the local artists who engraved these graves. The name of the engraver appears on the grave of Jehan Khan, which was engraved by ustad (master) Juma Sangtrash (engraver). All the seven inscribed graves were engraved by Juma Sangtrash. He was an eminent engraver of the Kalhora and Talpur periods. His name also appears on many of the stone carved graves in Hyderabad, Tando Muhammad Khan and Tando Allahyar districts. There are also few other stone carved graves which were made in the British period. One of the graves on an ornately carved podium bears the name of Ahmed Khan, who died in 1277 AH/1860 AD. Some plastered graves also exist in the graveyard – which are also said to belong to the dignitaries of the Bhurgari tribe.



Bhurgari graves fast falling to pieces

The stone carved graves of Bhurgari nobles are the finest in the Tando Hyder area. All stone platforms depict geometric and floral designs which are fabulously created by the engravers. Similar carvings can also be seen in various graveyards in Thatta, Karachi, Jamshoro and Hyderabad districts.

At present, the graveyard of the Bhurgaris is in a deplorable condition. Most of the dislodged gravestones are lying strewn over the site on which the local people have placed sheets of cloth. All the stone-carved graves and platforms are crumbling slab by slab. The graveyard is the most endangered heritage site in Hyderabad district. The nearby brick kilns have also damaged the site. The brick makers are taking clay from the nearby site of the graveyard. Moreover, the smoke billowing from the chimneys has also affected the stone-carved graves. Sometimes, the owners of the brick kilns take away the valuable engraved slabs of the graves and platforms from the necropolis.

The graveyard must be saved from further human and environmental threats by stopping the brick kilns and fencing the site immediately. Further delay in the preservation of the site may lead to damage and destruction. It is suggested that the authorities concerned should straight away put up a fence to protect it from further damage and appoint – at least – a night watchman to keep an eye on those who easily whisk away the valuable pieces of art from the graveyard of the Bhurgaris.

The author is an anthropologist and has authored three books: 'Perspectives on the art and architecture of Sindh', 'Memorial Stones: Tharparkar' and 'Archaeology, Religion and Art in Sindh'. He may be contacted at: zulfi04@hotmail.com

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