

John Mohammed Butt: The hippie who became an imam

By Nadene Ghouri
Deoband, India



Forty years after following the hippie trail to South Asia, John Butt is still living in the region, and still spreading a message of peace and love - though now as an Islamic scholar.

As our car turned around the bumpy Indian road, a gleaming white marble minaret came into view. My fellow passenger, John Mohammed Butt, could barely contain his excitement.

"Can you see it?" he asks. "It's like the Oxford University of Islamic learning. For me these minarets and domes are just like the spires and towers of Oxford.

"It's been almost 30 years since I was last here and I am still getting the same thrill. This is my alma mater."

The alma mater in question is Darul-Uloom Deoband, South Asia's largest madrassa, or Islamic school.

Driving through the madrassa gates, we entered a world rarely seen by Western eyes.

Deoband was built in 1866 by Indian Muslims opposed to the then British rule. Little has changed since - winding streets and tiny courtyards lined with stalls selling fragrant chai, bubbling pots of rice and paintings of Mecca.

Everywhere are the Talibs, religious students, young men with dark-eyed fervent expressions carrying books or quietly reciting the Koran.

And in another scene reminiscent of Oxford, students riding bicycles.

A chai seller recognizes John and runs towards him. "John Sahib, John Sahib."

The two had not seen each other in decades, yet the man remembers him instantly. "John Sahib was the only student I ever saw who used to go jogging.

"There was only one John Mohammed - unique," he laughs.

That is perhaps not so surprising, when you learn that John Butt remains the first and only Western man ever to have graduated from Deoband.

He showed me his old dormitory room, a windowless cell where he spent eight years in a life of virtual seclusion, living under a regime of prayer and Koranic study.

But that is just one facet of this man's extraordinary life.

Aside from his time at Deoband, he has spent most of the past 40 years living among the fierce



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Pashtun tribes, who inhabit the lawless hinterland between Afghanistan and Pakistan. He went there in 1969, he says, as a dope-smoking young hippie and never came home. He laughs. "When people call me an ageing ex-hippie, I always reply that I am ageing maybe, but I'm certainly not ex. I'm still a hippie."

John Butt cuts an imposing figure.

At 6ft 5ins (1.95m) tall, he sports a long white beard and alabaster skin that is almost translucent. Dressed in flowing white ethnic robes, he reminds me of a Benedictine hermit monk or a Victorian explorer, swashbuckling straight out of the pages of an historical novel.

He tells me he adores the Queen, Stilton is his favorite cheese and that football is his passion. Yet among the border tribes, he is regarded as a native Pashtun and revered as an Islamic scholar. Home for him, until recently, was a tiny village in Pakistan's Swat valley.

Swat was once a popular tourist destination but is now the scene of regular battles between the Pakistani military and the Taliban.

But back in 1969, the young John was hooked from the moment he saw Swat, describing to me snow-capped mountains, rivers like flowing jewels, forests and alpine pastures.

It was, he says, "like Tolkien's Middle-earth, magical and other worldly" inhabited by tribal people who were "very pleasant, big-hearted, tolerant, easy-going and welcoming".

When his fellow hippies grew up and went home to become accountants and lawyers, John stayed on - becoming fluent in the Pashto language and studying Islam.

But John's world changed in the late 1980s, with the arrival of jihadists, who came to the border areas from all over the world to fight the war against the Russians in Afghanistan.

"I saw the rural, religious Pashtun way of life I had come to love so much being diluted, contaminated and poisoned, in particular by Arabs from the Middle East," he says.

"The way they practice Islam is very different to the tribal areas, but they used money and influence to impose their own set of values."

So he decided to fight for his adopted culture.

Peaceful Islam

In the early 1990s, he joined the BBC World Service Pashto service and helped to set up New Home New Life, a now iconic Afghan radio soap opera, known as The Archers of Afghanistan.

Six years ago, he set up a radio station which broadcasts across the Afghan-Pakistan border and which tries to promote tribal traditions along with peace and reconciliation.

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More recently, John has switched his attentions back to

Afghanistan and is spearheading the formation of a new Islamic university in the predominantly Pashtun city of Jalalabad.

"It makes perfect sense. There is currently nowhere in Afghanistan where a young man can do higher Islamic studies. They go to Pakistan, where as we know some of them have become radicalized," he says, emphasizing that his university will give a platform to moderates.

But this promotion of peaceful Islam has set him on a collision course with militants. His beloved Pakistan has now become too unsafe for him.



"Swat is a militarized zone and people I see as foreigners there now treat me like I'm the foreigner, even though I lived there for 40 years.

"It's hard to work out who is who any more - who is Taliban, who is criminal. The waters are very muddy."

Last year, waters of another kind finally put paid to his idyll, when his house was washed away in the floods which devastated the area and killed thousands.

"It was a relief in some ways. When I lost the house, I knew I'd never go back there."

Afghanistan has also become increasingly perilous after Taliban death threats.

The Taliban have delivered so-called night letters - notes hand-delivered in secret and at night for maximum impact - warning students not to study at the university and denouncing John as a Christian missionary or an "orientalist".

Death threats have also been made to his teachers and staff.

"I've hired some of the best Islamic scholars in the region - pious, good and brave men," he says.

"They know this is for the benefit of Afghanistan and they insist they will stay working with me despite the dangers."

As I said goodbye, he was planning to travel to Jalalabad on the local bus. We talked about the possibility of him being attacked and he admitted he could easily be killed.

But when I asked if he was scared, he brushed me off with a shrug. "You only die once. I could get hit by a bus tomorrow."