

South Asia

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In the current deafening criticism of Jewish, Christian, Hindu or Islamic fundamentalism and zealotry, it is hard to believe that Islam can inspire its adherents to social peace, democratic politics, economic justice, spiritual and secular education, protection against domestic and communal violence, and a broader humanitarian volunteerism. These were, however, some of the cherished ideals by which the Khudai Khidmatgars (Servants of God) lived.

The Khudai Khidmatgars were a Populist Party of deeply religious Muslims among the Pukhtuns (Pathans) in the North-West Frontier Province of British India (now in Pakistan). The movement was founded in 1930 by Abdul Ghaffar Khan (1889-1986), known among his people as the 'pride of the Afghans', and as the 'Frontier Gandhi' in India. They had sworn to rid themselves of social ills and to serve humanity, irrespective of caste or creed at the local and national levels. Hence their name, 'servants of God.' While the British colonial authorities decried Abdul Ghaffar Khan as another trouble-making Indian nationalist dreaming of freedom, Mahatma Gandhi found in him a paragon of non-violence and one who drew his *ahimsa* (non-violence) from the Holy Quran.¹

Abdul Ghaffar Khan, a local khan, and his close friends of different economic backgrounds devoted their lives to the teaching of Islamic social morality, Pukhtun national unity, and humanitarian volunteerism. What made the Khudai Khidmatgars unique among the various Muslim movements in the wider region were their chief hallmarks: individual voluntary self-reformation; a life-long commitment to serving humanity; rejection of violence, discrimination, sectarianism or polemical factionalism; protection of non-Muslim minority rights; non-communalism and egalitarian political philosophy; and the championing of women's and children's rights. Detractors of the Khudai Khidmatgars accused them of 'un-Afghan' behaviour, i.e. letting their women go outside and take part in political activities.²

Jihad, for an individual member of the movement, was waged against oneself; one would thus strive to serve one's parents, spouse, children, relatives and neighbours. New members were required to swear on the Quran not to lie, gamble, beat their wives or children, use drugs, quarrel with neighbours, or carry guns. These simple objectives were the most difficult to achieve in the Pukhtun culture, one of the most violent in the region. What made people join the movement so enthusiastically was the good moral example set by the leaders, who united people through the practice of Islamic morality and turned them into 'homo khidmatiqus' who would serve their fellow humans without seeking reward, and sacrifice themselves for their comfort and safety. Their motto was that the service of humanity was the best worship of God. They succeeded in creating at the local level a culture of *khidmat-o-qurbani* (service and sacrifice) through two Quranic means: *sabr-o-salath* (patience and prayers). The Khudai Khidmatgars summarized their mission in the Quranic injunction of stopping evil and spreading virtue.³

Non-violence

Abdul Ghaffar Khan launched the Khudai Khidmatgar movement primarily to unify the Pukhtuns, whose Afghan tribalism had maintained not only division but also great tension. To him, their mutual violence was their worst enemy – since more Pukhtuns were killed by their own kinsmen than by *kafirs* (infidels, British). A 'non-violent

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Pukhtun' was simply an oxymoron. But the Khudai Khidmatgars brought about a major change when thousands of them swore not to touch or carry any weapons of violence, setting an example of what some critics called extreme non-violence. In doing so, some became open and easy targets for their enemies and were murdered on account of previous unsettled scores. Their seeking for and granting of forgiveness for past feuds reflected their belief in God's love and His preference for forgiveness over retribution as stated in the Quran. Abdul Ghaffar Khan stressed the need of ending violence at home, in the family, and amongst kinsmen and neighbours. According to Mahatma Gandhi, non-violence with Abdul Ghaffar Khan was not a policy but an article of faith. 'The more I see him the more I love him', wrote Gandhi to India's viceroy Lord Willingdon. 'I know of the greatness of Abdul Ghaffar Khan. He is a brave Pathan, [...] sincere and honest man and he walks in the fear of God.'

Women's rights

The Khudai Khidmatgars were Pukhtuns, the major Afghan ethnic group living on both sides of the Duran Line between Afghanistan and present-day Pakistan. Women's rights were unheard of among the Pukhtuns. But the Khudai Khidmatgars placed women's rights at the focal point of their movement, which attracted female writers and activists. They attempted to raise awareness of the inferior status of women in rural and tribal areas, where they were sold into marriage, and deprived of property and educational rights as imbedded in Islamic law. The Khidmatgars began by honouring women's rights to education and property at the level of domicile. Their women's rights agenda landed them in opposition to the mullahs. The khans also opposed the Khudai Khidmatgars because the latter championed peasants' social and economic rights as well. The hardest blow came from the colonial authorities that saw the movement as a threat to the British Empire in this strategically important Frontier Province – hence it was to be nipped in the bud. Ultimately, however, their worst enemies were the Pukhtuns' own mass illiteracy and ignorance that maintained their enslavement to social ills, such as generation-long blood feuds and suppression of women's rights.⁴

Social reform

The Khudai Khidmatgars' struggle for social reform, economic justice, communal peace and brotherhood, and freedom from colonialism, turned them into a national salvation movement. Their steadfast and non-violent braving of the worse kind of opposition of feudal lords, Muslim clergymen, and British colonial authorities, further endeared them to the masses who voted them twice into government. As the movement turned massive in the early 1930s, the

provincial government started suppressing the Khudai Khidmatgars, killing in the period of April-June 1930 approximately 100 and arresting more than one thousand people in the settled districts. Tribal agencies were bombed for the first time due to the spreading of the movement into Afghanistan where it could become a problem for the pro-British government of Nadir Shah. Repression further popularized the Khudai Khidmatgars, who now demanded more political reforms and liberating measures.⁵

In pursuit of their populist and non-communalist agenda, the Khudai Khidmatgars' provincial cabinets passed legislation that abolished feudal privileges that the khans, under the British patronage, had been enjoying at the expense of the general populace. The legislation also relieved the social and economic liabilities of peasants and small landowners that had been suffering under Muslim feudal lords and Hindu usurers. Furthermore, it made office holders accountable to the electorates and it decommunalized such bodies through joint electorates to promote mutual trust between Hindus and Muslims. The Khudai Khidmatgars also opened up governmental positions based on merit and competition. This was done through a public service commission, a practice that broke feudal monopoly over official bureaucracy.⁶ Their overall anti-feudalist agenda, combined with their insistence on equality and dignity for both Muslims and non-Muslims, placed them in opposition to the Frontier Muslim League.

Partition

The Khudai Khidmatgars' social programme was halted by the worst Hindu-Muslim communal massacres in mid-1947 that eventually led to the partition of India on 14-15 August 1947. In that fateful summer of 1947, as retaliation against the Hindu massacre of Muslims in India, Muslim gangs attacked Hindus in the Frontier Province. When the communal fighting intensified, due to the British colonial authorities' failure to provide adequate safety, the Khidmatgars, with great risks to their own lives, protected thousands of Hindus in their villages. Their dictum was that every majority must protect its minorities. At the time of the partition, the Khudai Khidmatgars, who held the majority in the legislative body of the Frontier Province, called for a separate state, Pukhtunistan, in a province independent of both India and Pakistan. They did not wish to join either of the newly established states. But the British imposed a referendum upon them to join either India or Pakistan. They rejected what they called an illogical and unwanted offer, and boycotted the referendum, which eventually worked in favour of Pakistan.⁷ On trumped-up charges of anti-state activities, the Muslim League rulers jailed many followers, often without trial. The persecution forced Abdul Ghaffar and other leaders underground or into exile.

Their struggle was then carried on by several political splinter parties in the Frontier Province. Faced with martial law, this post-partition generation did not flinch from retaliating in kind. Although the elderly Khudai Khidmatgars condemned this, they simply could not control it. ♦

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Notes

1. Gandhi, M. K. (1942), *Non-Violence in Peace and War*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, Vol. 1, p. 298.
2. Bukhari, Farigh (1957), *Bacha Khan: Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan ke Savaneh Hayat*. Peshawar: Naya Maktabah, pp. 54-55.
3. Tendulkar, D. G. (1967), *Abdul Ghaffar Khan*. New Delhi: Gandhi Peace Foundation, pp. 59-60.
4. Khan, Abdul Ghaffar (1981), *Zama Jwand au Jehdojehad*. Kabul: Afghan State Publications, pp. 3-8.
5. Gupta, Amit Kumar (1976), *North West Frontier Province: Legislative and Freedom Struggle, 1932-1947*. New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research, pp. 201-206.
6. Rittenberg, Stephen Alan (1988), *Ethnicity, Nationalism, and the Pakhtuns: The Independence Movement in India's North West Frontier Province*. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, pp. 249-256.
7. Jansson, Erland (1981), *India, Pakistan or Pakhtunistan*. Uppsala: Studia Historica Upsaliensia, pp. 218-222.