

ABDUL GHAFFAR KHAN: MORE THAN JUST A FRONTIER GANDHI

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ABSTRACT

Abdul Ghaffar Khan and Mahatma Gandhi were two personalities integral to the politics of the subcontinent preceding and in the lead up to Partition. Both of them shared an ideological overlap pertaining to the use of non-violence to attain their goals and in the process, they were able to convey this message to their followers. Their comradeship demonstrated unity in the face of division and posed a challenge to the status quo. However, despite these similarities, both should be recognized as two separate individuals rather than one being subsumed under the other or being presented merely as a frontier version. This paper argues that Ghaffar Khan's legacy has been unjustly subsumed under the narrative of Mahatma Gandhi and the mainstream Indian National Congress, thereby downplaying his grassroots efforts and calling for a recognition of his distinct vision.

KEY WORDS: Communal, Non-violence, Khudai Khidmatgaar, Unity, Frontier

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This paper argues that Ghaffar Khan's distinctiveness lies in his refusal to engage with power-seeking politics and his success in cultivating a communal, grassroots movement. The Khudai Khidmatgaar movement, was a communal anticolonial resistance movement that adopted non-violence not only as a practical approach but as a principle for life and a marker of identity. Therefore, to fully appreciate and acknowledge the collective communal movement, one must look beyond the reductive, simplistic label of 'Frontier Gandhi' and analyse the indigenous intellectual and political frameworks that led to a successful historic communal mobilisation. The struggles both Gandhi and Ghaffar Khan faced were indeed collective, but their efforts stemmed from very distinct contexts. For Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the struggle entailed reforming communal identity in a number of ways which ranged from acknowledging the mistakes of the past to shape the future. This was done through rallying the community around the need for presenting a united front to overcome historically rooted factional divisions. The avenues of communal services, education and the revival of Pukhto in addition to cultivating communal spaces such as within rural and prison spatialities will be explored to demonstrate sites of non-violent resistance. Additionally, Ghaffar Khan never sought to be an official leader and wanted to be a part of the community to serve it. He reasoned with his people through an interpretation of Islam that would suit his purpose and take forward his particular vision rather than a generic universalised one. The context of a communal grass roots movement underpinned by Islamic and Pukhtunwali principles thus makes him stand out as a distinct figure.

The paper utilizes a critical historiographical and archival methodology

by analysing a diverse primary sources to acquire a firsthand perspective of the formulation of the movement and the personal life of Abdul Ghaffar Khan. The primary research draws extensively from Ghaffar Khan's own autobiography, *My Life and Struggle*, alongside contemporary eyewitness accounts and prison letter exchanges with other activists like Mohammad Yunus, which provide direct insight into the movement's philosophy, internal struggles, and practical application. By foregrounding Ghaffar Khan's own voice, the paper seeks to establish the conceptual framework of his resistance as distinct and original.

Textual sources have been complemented by audio-visual ones as this paper has also explored the speeches and addresses of Abdul Ghaffar Khan, primarily digitized online through the Doordarshan archives. The analysis of the paper was also facilitated by a visit to the Bacha Khan Markaz at the headquarters of the Awami National Party in Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa where copies of newspapers, periodicals and photographs were also consulted. To fully understand the articulation of communal vision, both textual and audio-visual sources have been cross analysed and compared to provide a more through picture. Furthermore, visiting the small museum within the headquarters, which displayed Ghaffar Khan's personal belongings, also aided in understanding the way he is commemorated within communities.

The paper thus utilizes both a historical and an ethnographic approach to support the claim that one should treat him Ghaffar Khan an individual with his own distinct vision and principles and look beyond the simplistic label of a 'Frontier Gandhi'. The paper firstly compares the principles of non-

violence adopted by both Gandhi and Ghaffar Khan and outlines their overlaps and divergences, with a particular focus on the prison as a space for resistance. The paper then proceeds to highlight why Ghaffar Khan's vision stands out as unmatched owing to his determination to counter divisions through promoting unity. Lastly, how this was done through promoting a sense of community, such as through reviving Pukhto, education and welfare, is also highlighted to show how the movement was catered to a particular spatiality and community.

THE STRATEGIC AND CONTEXTUAL ADOPTION OF NON-VIOLENCE

Non-violence was a prevalent ideology in the anticolonial struggle in the subcontinent. At its forefront was the Congress where Mahatma Gandhi stood as its visionary. When the Khudai Khidmatgaar movement centred their struggle around non-violence, it was commonly viewed as its subset or a co-optation of the mainstream discourse of non-violence embodied by the Congress. This can be demonstrated through the similarities in approach adopted by both Abdul Ghaffar Khan and the Mahatma. They both centred their approaches around non-violence and wanted to retain it for the long term. Their comradeship was centred around this commonality despite very different contexts and there were overlaps in terms of situating and sourcing their struggle in a common origin as well. Ghaffar Khan expanded beyond orthodox Islam and sought to integrate Buddhism alongside the teachings of the Bhagavada Gita in his approach. Ghaffar Khan viewed Gandhi's perspective not as one isolated or distinctly separate from his but rather integrated the principle of ahimsa for his movement. Ahimsa was 'adopted as a whole package

and not bit by bit...not nearly as a political expediency to achieve independence but as an integral program for life' (Korejo 1994, 50). Mutual understanding was also reflected in interactions with the Congress as a political entity as both parties strongly opposed enacting a violent approach. Admiration and understanding were also two way. When Ghaffar Khan stated that 'I started teaching the Pathans non-violence only a short time ago...the Pathans have learned this lesson and grasped the idea of nonviolence much quicker and much better' (Khan 1969, 193). Gandhi admitted that the Pathans superseded the Hindus in terms of courage and bravery when it came to consistency.

However, despite these similarities, Gandhi remained tied to the party politics of Congress whereas for Ghaffar Khan such partisan loyalty did not matter. Ghaffar Khan's sole focus was sustaining the community and he never wanted to be completely dependent on the Congress and thus strived to keep a healthy distance. The Congress concession with accepting Partition demonstrated these differences as for them non-violence was more of a means to an end policy unlike for Ghaffar Khan for whom it was an all-encompassing principle. Such was the relevance that in order to be involved in the movement, a member had to pledge allegiance to 'I shall never use violence I shall never retaliator take revenge and I shall forgive anyone who indulges in operational excesses against me' (Korejo 1994, 16). The manifestation and adoption of violence for Ghaffar Khan cannot be viewed as a mere simplistic extension of Gandhian philosophy but rather it acquired its own ground and had its own distinct purpose.

Abdul Ghaffar Khan's utilisation of non-violence further stood out in comparison to the mainstream discourse adopted by the Congress due to its communal application to

the Pukhtuns, who were stereotyped as violent, barbaric, prone to feuds, guerrilla warfare and factionalism characterising their community. Such actions were codified in Pukhtunwali (the code of honour) alongside badal (revenge) and were hence culturally rooted in the structure itself. Abdul Ghaffar Khan acknowledged these faults and thus viewed non-violence as a crucial remedy for counteracting these notions and in the process, recreating and reforming one's identity and sense of belonging. Correcting misrepresentations of the Pukhtuns was a key element of revival and the use of non-violence was an outlet that was used to demonstrate how historically rooted odds had been defied. Recognition and acknowledgement were one feature but then using this awareness to craft a pathway that would challenge the existing hierarchies by producing an anomaly was why non-violence was seen as the exception rather than the norm with the Pukhtuns. By doing so, Ghaffar Khan demonstrated a resistance to propaganda that had been used to suppress the Frontier and presented the colonisers and their subordinates with a worrisome challenge. Non-violence thus entailed an exercise of agency as one regained control over defining oneself.

Cultivation and adherence to non-violence were ensured via the flexible moulding of the particular rigid cultural and religious codes of conduct. Religious justifications drew on the history of Islam and the sufferings undergone by its early followers who persevered in the face of hardships through patience rather than conflict. Non-violence through restraint and tolerance was shown as more rewarding than giving in to one's emotions. This extended on to the differentiation between the lesser Jihad I Asghar 'legitimate military struggle and holy war against injustice' and the greater Jihad I Akabar 'inner struggle of

an individual to develop a true commitment to Islam' (Banerjee 2000, 148). Elevation of adopting non-violence was bought about through the repositioning of the concept of Jihad and by emphasising that 'Jihad does not simply consist of wielding the sword in the name of religion but of using our inner strength to conquer operation and cruelty' (Yunus 1986, 72). This made the Pukhtuns re-evaluate and question the rules they were abiding by for their culture rested on the inferior principles of violence and aggression looked down upon as a last resort rather than the first instinct. Furthermore, those who lost their lives by participating in non-violence were awarded the rank underpinning the title of a martyr or a 'shaheed' and hence striving for non-violence became a matter of prestige and honour. This honour was a common feature shared with Pukhtunwali which in the past was centred around gaining victory in a battle but now it had been refashioned by amplifying the bravery and courage embodied by those who followed the path of non-violence. Such was its strength that anyone who defected from non-violence and gave into violence was viewed as dishonourable and shameful. Such feelings evoked adherence that would not have been possible through physical reprimand and hence behaviour was 'self-regulated or socially codified rather than imposed vertically via state policing and coercion' (Arbab 2017, 238). By grounding non-violence through the lens of Islamic and Pukhtunwali principles, Ghaffar Khan was able to resonate with the wider community who despite their deeply ingrained attitudes internalised an alternative. The unity produced by nonviolence exemplified through religion and culture was preferred over the division and hatred produced by violence and hence the benefits of one outweighed the other.

Aside for reforming identity and the self, non-violence was also embodied as a practical response to the power imbalances underpinning imperial rule. For Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the colonised stood little to no chance in achieving victory through violence as the British possessed greater arms and manpower that they could never match, let alone rival. Violence was not an option and was seen as a battle lost without even requiring a fight due to the massive imbalances. Violence always guaranteed an outcome of victory or defeat, but non-violence did not envision these goals and thus there was nothing to win over but oneself. The use violence had failed to bring about any change and instead perpetuated further destruction as demonstrated through the world wars. It was also counterintuitive as the British had a set in stone strategy for dealing with violence and knew that exercising force would have guaranteed results in their favour. Non-violence, and that too from the least expected community, presented them with a dilemma they had not faced before and were thus apprehensive about how to counteract it. Their usual approach was failing to curb dissent and instead was producing an adverse effect. The more the British tried to repress the Pukhtuns, the more they rallied, and their fervour and participation increased. Consequently, as reiterated by Ghaffar Khan, 'the British try to instigate us to violence for which they had an answer but they had no answer to non-violence...the British would often say the non-violent Pathan is more dangerous than the violent' (Sahibzadah 2021, 302). The clever use of non-violence hence presented a glitch in the system shaking the foundations of certainty and assuredness upon which the colonisers rested.

Nonviolence was also successful in removing fear and from those who followed

it. The tactics of the British did not alarm those who adhered to non-violence as they would anticipate them and prepare themselves to embrace and tolerate them. Threats became void as 'the violent movement had created fear and cowardice in the people's minds. It had weakened people's courage and morale, but the non-violent movement had made people fearless and brave and inspired them with a high sense of morality' (Khan 1969, 143).

Prison and incarceration became an ineffective sanction and a form of punishment as people were no longer scared but rather prepared to undergo the hardships. In fact, followers of non-violence continued their adherence and the struggle even within the bounds and limitations of prison instead of being deterred. This had a spill over impact in terms of mobilisation as other people became inspired and motivated to join the non-violent struggle. Defeating the aim of incarceration, the prison was reimagined as a space for resistance, exchange of knowledge and 'training grounds for (a) national political worker' (Sahibzadah 2021, 270). It was behind the bars where Abdul Ghaffar Khan came into contact with political prisoners such as Kharak Singh Khel and Congress leaders such as Lala Lajpat Rai and he used the space as an opportunity to forge unity between the Muslims, Hindu and Sikhs. The prison embodied the unity envisioned by non-violence and stood at par with the reality as a solidarity emerged out of suffering, a solidarity the British wanted to prevent through their divide and rule policy. Despite the rampant corruption and bribery, Ghaffar Khan refused to accept any special treatment from the wardens and jailers and encouraged his followers to abide by the same principles. He thereby challenged the authority that was imposed on him even in a space meant for exercising control. The prison was also used as a place for learning

as Ghaffar Khan arranged for the prisoners to be educated and thus incarceration led to illiteracy being challenged. The prison was viewed as the goal to strive towards, rather than being saved from. The following sub-sections discuss Ghaffar Khan's efforts to promote unity to counter fragmentation after having highlighted his vision of non violence.

CULTIVATING CONSCIOUSNESS BY COUNTERING DIVISION

The mission of Abdul Ghaffar Khan can be encompassed through the need for unity, solidarity and sacrifice for the prosperity and development of the nation. The disharmony prevailing among the Pukhtun clans greatly alarmed him and he deemed it necessary to awaken political consciousness among the masses by demonstrating how success can only come through sacrifice. He highlighted how the Pukhtun Community was 'completely cut off from the world...nobody can come near us and see what we are like. Our enemies never stop making propaganda against us. They say that we are savages, that we are uncivilised' (Khan 1969, 123). While acknowledging the faults, Ghaffar Khan appealed to his followers by invoking the glorious Islamic history of Pukhtuns to invoke hope and determination. However, he simultaneously pointed to the absence of principles and leadership which ultimately resulted in a downfall in communal solidarity. He vividly demonstrated that the Pukhtuns were a great nation, but it was the absence of unity and a willingness to surrender for collective prosperity that has resulted in a dire situation. Drawing on the success of the United States of America and the withdrawal of the French in Algeria, he stated that 'they have one common object, one common ideal. They believe in that ideal and they keep that ideal in view always and another thing is that they are prepared to

make sacrifices for the sake of that idea' (Khan 1969, 220).

While referring to the case of other countries, he also pointed out that the colonisation of India had ripple like effects on the rest of the world as it was based on India that the British drew power to control its other colonies. A grassroots movement could thus challenge global domination and he thus issued a wakeup call for his people and urged them to sacrifice their personal gain for the common struggle or forever remain subordinated. Reclaiming control over one's land could only come about through this recognition and then translating it into action. The notion of unity for him was rooted in Islam and rather than using it as a marker of separation he used it as a means of amalgamation by stating that his people were Pukhtuns first and then Muslims. Highlighting the qualities of peace, justice and tolerance he emphasised that my religion is truth, love and service to God and humanity. Every religion that has come into the world has brought the message of love and brotherhood... those who harbour hatred and resentment in their hearts they do not know the meaning of religion' (Khan 1969, 195).

It was these aims of which later translated into self-sovereignty culminating in his demand for provincial autonomy in the shape of Pukhtunistan. Attempts at uniting people were met with extreme disharmony and deliberate divisions perpetuated by the British and the Muslim League. Ghaffar Khan reiterated that his party was social and communal first and only became political when the situation demanded it. The League subsumed representation of the entire Muslim population of India and claimed to be its sole spokesperson. They stirred up communal divisions which was especially noticeable in the 1946 elections where votes

were reduced to the temple or the mosque. However, their efforts bore little fruit as the Khudai Khidmatgaar won a landslide majority thereby demonstrating that the impact of Ghaffar Khan's efforts overcame divisive tactics. It had become clear that the League only wanted to seek power based on exploiting people's misfortune. Flaws were also inherent in the very concept of Pakistan as the League refused to consider the stakes of the Muslims left behind in India who would be subjected to bloodshed. In fact, it was this violence that the League utilised for propaganda to alter Pukhtun loyalties on the run up to independence. As stated, with every new outbreak of violence and rioting in the country their sense of belonging to a greater Muslim community became stronger...the league had waited for such opportunity for a long time and exploited it to its full advantage... it provided the league with its best weapon for winning over the sympathies of a large segment of Muslims' (Shah 2000, 171).

This chaos was further manipulated by the British to demonstrate that without them there would be no sense of order and that the Indians lacked capacity for self-governance, hence justifying their rule. Ghaffar Khan stood out for not wanting to gain political office whereas both the Congress and the League engaged in a battle for it. He refused numerous leadership offers reiterating that he only wanted to serve the people and that power would corrupt those who sought it. In fact, even when the Khudai Khidmatgaars won the election, the movement suffered greatly as people merely joined for the sake of power and did not embody the true spirit of selfless service required. His allyship with Congress was also one of support rather than strategy as he only accepted their help as a last resort when the Muslim League denied it from their end. For Ghaffar Khan, the League was

nothing more than a mere puppet of the British who were carrying out their work for them. Echoing Frantz Fanon's concept of the upper middle class, even after colonial withdrawal those in the League merely mimicked their rulers and continued with the tactics they had internalised. Both wanted to create and sustain divisions so their authority remained unchallenged and so that they could retain their privilege. Independence and freedom were highly questioned as the vacuum left behind and colonial structures were merely taken over and repeated rather than being uprooted and eradicated. Pakistan for Abdul Ghaffar Khan was thus, founded on hatred. She was born not of love but of hatred and she grew up on hatred, on malice...Pakistan was created by the grace of the British in order that the Hindus and Muslims...forget that they were brothers. Pakistan is unable to think in terms of peace and friendship. She wants to keep the Pakistani people under control by making them live in a nightmare' (Khan 1969, 209-210).

By saying this, he warned his people about the incoming challenges and that survival and freedom were dependent on sacrifice and if this was not abided by then hierarchies would continue to be cemented. Ghaffar Khan thus wanted to utilise Islam as a uniting rather than a dividing force and alerted his people to be on guard against unscrupulous politicians who are not ashamed of exploiting the fair name of religion...to facilitate their own raise to power. Our people have been deceived time in again by such self-styled champions of Islam who raised the cry of religion in danger' (Khan and Hameed 1987, 73).

The aim was to forego divisions to achieve political consciousness which would be used to reclaim agency. Correcting the past depended on acting in the present to

achieve freedom in the future. He urged preparedness and caution rather than promising an easily achievable utopia. Thus, he provided a realistic rather than a fabricated picture.

After independence, the Khudai Khidmatgaars went to all extents to ensure the safety of the lives of Hindus and Sikhs whereas the Muslim League occupied the properties left behind by them and strategized the violence to further their exploitative and divisive aims. He sought to reform and eventually get rid of hierarchical divisions but was continuously met with resistance and repression from both the British and fellow Muslims. Moreover, he always prioritised reconstruction over ruling and sought to give service rather than to govern over. His support base was determined not by religious similarities but rather on a geographical and ideological similarity. However, he did not stay confined to these two realms but rather combined certain aspects from both to forge his own distinct pathway. The next sub-section highlights his efforts in ensuring communal solidarity after having unfolded the need for unity in the face of fragmentation.

THE COMMUNITY AS A SITE OF STRUGGLE

Another feature exemplifying Abdul Ghaffar Khan beyond the label of the Frontier Gandhi was his emphasis on the recognition of the Frontier and its inhabitants as a distinct space in of itself and bringing it to the core rather than leaving it marginalised on the periphery. This was done by establishing and integrating the movement in the very fabric and roots of society rather than remaining external to, or above it. It entailed demonstrating the necessity of unity for prosperity and success and providing avenues through which to acquire it. One such platform was that of language and

education. Cultural regeneration was of crucial significance to Abdul Ghaffar Khan, and he strived towards making people realise the value behind this. Rescuing Pukhto from its existence formed an essential component for the struggle and Ghaffar Khan aimed to use it as a force of unity through a utilizing it as a tool of communication. The extent of apathy was clearly demonstrated when people claimed that there was no substantial knowledge in the language and made no effort to support overcoming its negligence. For Ghaffar Khan, 'only with the development of the mother tongue that people can prosper' (Sahibzadah 2021, 511). And surely his sentiment bore fruit as the journal he launched ushered in a revitalization of Pukhto in the global community and people began to learn it to further the struggle. The impact was so intense that Amanullah Khan in Afghanistan deemed it as a mandatory language of instruction and within the Frontier nationalist poems were recited in the language to strengthen patriotism.

The necessity of having a common language was also shown through the struggle to ensure literacy. The very first steps Ghaffar Khan took were to ensure quality education by constructing madrassahs in his area. He was aware of the poor-quality education offered by the British and that too in a language the pupils did not understand. Furthermore, the initial resistance he faced was from the local mullahs (clerics) who deliberately kept the conditions of low standards so they could retain the status bestowed upon them by the British. The hurdles Ghaffar Khan faced were mostly along the lines of accusing him to be a kufr (infidel) and through this the mullahs hoped that the villagers would be deterred from sending their children to school. They went to the extent of claiming that anyone who acquired education in any

school would be destined for hell while at the same time they presented no viable alternative. Ghaffar Khan mobilised support by touring districts and demonstrating the compulsion in Islam about acquiring knowledge and education. Through this narrative, his movement became vested in tackling illiteracy even during his imprisonment and accessibility improved across class and gender. Ghaffar Khan was inspired by the Sikhs he encountered in prison who were more patriotic than the Hindus and Muslims as they understood the language of their holy book Guru Granth sahib, and this strengthened their identity and at large, the struggle for independence. Learning was thus centred on comprehending one's language and this further boosted the significance of Pukhto. The long term sustained result of this was the appearance of the Khudai Khidmatgaar movement was not sudden and unforeseen but rather the culmination of 20 years of sustained activities to reach educational levels in political consciousness. Many of those young men who join the Khudai Khidmatgaar in the 1930s had been educated in various schools which Badshah Khan had established in the 1920's where they had been exposed to discussions of politics and world affairs' (Banerjee 2000, 141).

However, learning and communal participation was not limited to educational institutions on their own. A key site of serving the community were the camps of the Khudai Khidmatgaars. Communal service was mandatory for anyone wanting to join the movement and everyone regardless of wealth and status had to contribute, even Ghaffar Khan himself which further inspired people. Tasks were not limited on an individualistic level but rather for the collective benefit. This included preparing food, maintaining sanitation, physical

exercises and collecting donations to sustain the movement. Support was especially necessary to ensure the survival and sustenance of the families of the imprisoned and on such occasions the community rallied to provide assistance. This fulfilled the very aim of the movement which was to be of service for the community as God was not in need of any service, but the only way one can benefit humanity was through serving his creation. These tasks became a site of resistance as it demonstrated unity thereby defying the deliberate divisions perpetuated by the British.

A key example of this was the uniforms of the red shirts made through 'the use of khadi by Indians to make a statement of self-reliance indigenous technology' (Banerjee 2000, 19) thereby demonstrating self-sufficiency to overcome dependency. The significance of the Khudai Khidmatgaar movement also lay in the fact that it was centred around the rural villages as a focal point rather than trickling down from the urban centre. Thus 'history has shown that movements originating in the cities have come to an end in the hands of the rulers but village-based movements cannot be ended easily' (Sahibzadah 2021, 492). This counteracted the material hierarchies and encouraged the Pukhtuns to overcome factionalism as they looked beyond their lineages and interacted with other clans to further strengthen communal solidarity. The community thus fostered an egalitarian space and hence Abdul Ghaffar Khan's efforts transcend that of simply being a version of Gandhi planted elsewhere.

CONCLUSION

Ghaffar Khan and the Khudai Khidmatgaar movement stood ahead of its time albeit as an anomaly. It was shaped by, and in turn, shaped the course of non-violent resistance

to colonialism. Political consciousness was centred around the need for unity and sacrifice which was manifested in serving the community over the self. Despite it being geographically rooted, its impacts were felt across the nation as the image and identity of Pukhtun society went under massive reconstruction and national revitalization. The movement stood against manipulation and exploitation in the name of religion and interpreted Islam to further its cause in a humanistic way. These qualities posed a challenge to authority back then and sadly until now there remains little to none mention of this phenomenon in the official government sponsored history of Pakistan. The erasure demonstrates the significance and powerful impact of the movement as even today those in power want people to remain uneducated to curb dissent, a key fault that Ghaffar Khan fought to overcome. His words invoke the patriotism he hoped to awaken among his people as he expressed his desire of seeing Pukhtunistan as one great longing. I want to see all...united into one brotherhood. I want to see them share each other sorrow and happiness I want to see them work together as equal partners I want to see them play their national role and take their rightful place among the nations of the world for the service of God in humanity' (Khan 1969, 122).

It was precisely due to his utilisation of Islam to reform Pukhtun culture and inculcate a sense of belonging that makes him unmatched. By doing so, he was able to challenge and overturn the very fabric of a society historically ridden with divisions and make his community emerge like a phoenix from its ashes. As such, his achievements deserve recognition in of themselves rather than being equated to or being considered a subset of the generic title of a Frontier Gandhi bestowed upon him.

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