

The Emergence of Khudai Khidmatgar Movement in the North-West Frontier Province and Its Emphasis on Non-Violence in the Pashtoon Society

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The North-West Frontier Province of British India had been of special interest to the Raj. Due to its strategic location the province played a significant role in the shaping and re-shaping of the Indian history. It remained under strict government control because security consideration was given importance over the grant of reforms including social, economic and political reforms. Till 1932, N-WFP was governed through Special Ordinances and all demands requesting the introduction of reforms at par with other provinces of British India were given no consideration by the colonial administration.

The N-WFP was an overwhelming Muslim majority province with 93% Muslim population. The Pashtoons were the dominant ethnic community in the province. The specificity of the Pashtoon particularism, with its combination of religion and nationalism made it distinct from the rest of the South Asia. Since the British conquest (1849) till the partition of India (1947) this area remained a battle ground between the Pashtoons and the colonial government. The Pashtoon opposed it through all available means. The Ulema remained at the forefront of resistance against the occupational forces. Interestingly unlike the other parts of India, in the N-WFP the Ulema were anti-establishment, indeed preoccupied with *Jihad* to get rid of the British imperialism in that part of South Asia. However, in the 20th century, the armed resistance gave way to unarmed non-violent struggle due to the inspiration and leadership of Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the founder of the Khudai Khidmatgar movement.

As mentioned earlier, the Pashtoon regarded the British rule as a curse. Their main concern was to get rid of the British imperialism at all costs. This being the main reason that during the freedom struggle of India they sided with other anti-British forces including the Indian National Congress rather than to give their support to their co-religionist, the All-India Muslim League. Being an overwhelming Muslim majority province there was no fear of 'Islam in danger' in the N-WFP. There was no fear of 'Hindu domination' as it prevailed in Central and Northern India.

Abdul Ghaffar Khan, (1890-1988) the founder of the movement was born in Utmanzai (Charsadda) district Peshawar.¹ After his early education he preferred social services over the government job and commenced his social activities as educationalist and joined Fazli Wahid, popularly known as the Haji of Turangzai, another anti-British social reformer of Charsadda. Their combined efforts resulted in opening of schools in Peshawar Valley. Apart from religious education, the students were imbued with the concepts of patriotism. Abdul Ghaffar Khan was also in touch with Mahmood-ul-Hasan, the chief divine at Deoband and Ubaidullah Sindhi, the revolutionary scholar. They even had planned for the establishment of an anti-British centre in the tribal area but it did not materialise. Haji of Turangzai continued preaching against the British imperialism and he urged his disciples to join him in getting rid of British colonialism. The authorities could not

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remain silent spectator for a long time. They decided to arrest Haji of Turangzai but he made good his escape, crossed over to tribal area and remained there till his death in December 1937, successfully organised people against the British Indian government.ⁱⁱ

The year 1919 saw India in turmoil. Economic situation was getting worse; industrial workers were resentful at the poor condition under which they had to work and peasants were unhappy over the price-hike in the daily commodities. Muslims were protesting over the treatment meted out to the Turkish Caliph by the Allied Powers at the end of the First World War and the nationalists in India were perturbed over the 'broken promises' made during the course of War to enlist the Indian support to the British war efforts. Meanwhile, to curb the 'seditious activities' in the country, the Government of India enforced the Rowlatt Act. The nationalists denounced it and Mahatma Gandhi termed it as 'unjust, subversive of the principles of liberty and justice, and destructive of the elementary rights of individual on which the safety of the community as a whole and the state itself is based'.ⁱⁱⁱ Following other parts of India, protest meetings were held in the N-WFP. Abdul Ghaffar Khan held a protest meeting at Utmanzai, participated by more than 50,000 people. In the rural areas of the province, this was the first political meeting with such a huge number of participants, convened to express solidarity with an all-India cause. Soon Khilafat movement was launched in India. It received tremendous support in the N-WFP. An offshoot of the Khilafat movement was *Hijrat* movement. The Ulema declared India as *Dar-ul-Harb* (Land of War) and advised the Muslims to migrate to *Dar-ul-Islam* (Land of Peace). Afghanistan, the neighbourly Muslim country with which they had religious, cultural, political and ethnic ties was deemed to be as a safe destination. Amanullah Khan, the young anti-British Amir offered asylum to the intending *Muhajirin*. As Peshawar was the main city on the way to Afghanistan it became the hub of the movement.^{iv}

Abdul Ghaffar Khan, like many other Pashtoons also migrated to Afghanistan. After staying for a couple of months at Kabul, he realised that these *Muhajirin* would soon develop differences with the Afghan authorities. They were aggressive and ill-disciplined. Moreover, the presence of a large number of British spies in the *Muhajirin* rank and file further aggravated the situation. They demanded from Amanullah to wage a *Jihad* against the British government immediately which he was unable to do. This led to the condemnation of the Afghan monarch. Amanullah was accused of betraying the cause of Islam for not declaring war against the British. Disappointed at the attitude of the Afghan Amir, the *Muhajirin* started their back journey to India. On their way back to India they faced miseries and hardships of the journey.^v

After the bitter experience of the *Hijrat*, Abdul Ghaffar Khan concentrated on social uplift of his own people in the N-WFP. He came back from Afghanistan and started organising people against the illiteracy and social evils then prevailing in the Pashtoon society. He consulted like-minded Pashtoon social workers and intelligentsia. They decided to jointly struggle for the eradication of social evils from Pashtoon society like blood feuds and factionalism, prevention of crimes and the use of the intoxicants. Moreover, they emphasised on creating awareness among the Pashtoons regarding the modern education and the revival of Pashto language.

As stated earlier, the social and educational backwardness of the Pashtoons prompted Abdul Ghaffar Khan and his associates to form the *Anjuman-al-Islah-ul-Afaghana* (Society for the Reformation of the Afghans) on 1 April 1921. The aims and objectives of the *Anjuman* included: the eradication of social evils, promotion of unity amongst the Pashtoons, prevention of lavish spending on the social events and encouragement of Pashto language and literature. One of its first steps was to educate Pashtoons. In April 1921 the first branch of the Azad Islamia Madrassa was opened at Utmanzai, followed by other branches in different parts of the Peshawar Valley. They proved to be popular institutions, which was reflected in the ever increasing number of students. To revive Pashto and to promote Pashtoon culture, poetic contests were regularly arranged at the *Anjuman's* annual meetings. Pashtoon poets were encouraged and eventually motivated a large number of Pashtoon nationalist poets including Fazal Mahmood Makhfi, Abdul Akbar Khan, Abdul Khaliq Khaleeq, Abdul Ghani Khan, and host of others who contributed to the development of Pashto literature.^{vi}

Initially the *Anjuman* was a social reform movement but soon it developed into a political movement. Its members regarded British rule as the root cause of the pernicious poverty, backwardness, illiteracy, and ignorance of the Pashtoons. The Pashtoons were urged to unite against alien rule and jointly struggle against social evils and put an end to their blood-feuds. The *Anjuman* members undertook tours of various parts of the province and propagated the Pashtoon cause along these lines. The Pashtoons were exhorted to join the *Anjuman* and resist the British imperialism and its supporters in the N-WFP.

In September 1929, the *Anjuman* members proposed the formation of a youth league on the pattern of similar organisations in Afghanistan, Turkey, and Bukhara. On 1 September 1929 the formation of *Zalmo Jirga* (Youth League) was announced.^{vii} No exact age limit was fixed for its membership but the name itself indicated the composition of the organisation. Its membership was open to 'every youth without any discrimination of caste, creed or religion, provided he is literate'. Pashto was announced to be the official language of the *Jirgas* proceedings.^{viii}

To accommodate the majority of the illiterate sympathisers of the Pashtoon nationalists and the aged members of the community, another organisation Khudai Khidmatgar (Servants of God) was formed in November 1929.^{ix} This new organisation superseded the former and latter on became very popular and influential in the N-WFP. The party appealed to Pashtoons to join the organisation and help them in the eradication of social evils from Pashtoon society, to forge unity among their rank and file and to struggle for the liberation of their homeland from the foreign yoke. Both of the organisations were working for the promotion of the Pashto language and literature, and were struggling for the 'purification' of Pashtoon society and for the independence of the Pashtoon region. The leaders were almost the same. A member after joining one organisation automatically became a member of the other organisation. The same group of Pashtoon intellectuals who were guiding the *Jirga* were in the forefront of the Khudai Khidmatgar. Within a short span of time a network of the Khudai Khidmatgar organisation was established in the Pashtoon dominated areas of the province. The remarkable feature of the organisation was the solid support for it in the rural areas, which hitherto had been neglected by other political organisations. Many reasons contributed for the popularity of the Khudai Khidmatgars. Various sections of the society interpreted the Khudai Khidmatgar programme in their own way. To the Pashtoon intelligentsia, it was a

movement for the revival of Pashtoon culture with its distinct identity. To the smaller Khans, it was a movement that demanded political reforms for the province that would enfranchise them and give them a greater role in governance. Its anti-colonial stand suited the majority of the anti-establishment Ulema, who always regarded British rule in the sub-continent as a 'curse'. For the peasants and other poor classes it was against their economic oppressors, British imperialism and its agents — the pro-British Nawabs, Khan Bahadurs and the big Khans.

Khudai Khidmatgars and Non-Violence

One of the main characteristics of the Khudai Khidmatgar movement was the revival of Pashtoon nationalism in 20th century. Their sense of Pashtoonism drew on currents which emerged in the late sixteen and seventeen century, when Pashtoons viewed the Afghan-Mughal conflict as their struggle against usurpers from Hindustan and Delhi. It expressed itself in the poetry of Khushal Khan Khattak, the greatest Pashto poet of the late 17th century, whose works remained in oral culture and were now widely disseminated with the coming of print culture. Abdul Ghaffar Khan combined the Islamic values of hatred against slavery with Pashtoon values of freedom, and utilised its combination on the basis of his own freedom struggle.

The most significant feature of the Khudai Khidmatgar movement was their adoption of the non-violence and strict adherence to it. The volunteers were taught not to resort to violence and not to carry any weapons. Emphasis was given upon the forbearance and tolerance. They were told not to retaliate even if humiliated. Examples were given from the lives of the Holy Prophet, his Companions and of Jesus Christ. They were reminded of the atrocities of Makkans over Muslims in the early days of Islam and of how Holy Prophet and his Companions faced it with forbearance. After the conquest of Makkah the Muslims could take the revenge but following the path of non-violence Holy Prophet advise them to leave the Makkans unmolested.

Like many other tribal societies Pashtoon society was notorious for factionalism and blood feuds. Abdul Ghaffar Khan's main emphasis was on the prevention of blood feuds. Many families were exhausted by these blood feuds but were honour bound to take the revenge for the insult done to them by their opponents. Abdul Ghaffar Khan tried to convince them that by adopting non-violence the Pashtoon would never be defeated, as although violence could be countered by more violence. This sense of pride in registering victories against the Raj gave the Khudai Khidmatgars tremendous popularity and people flocked to the organisation in large numbers. Abdul Ghaffar Khan developed his own perception of non-violence and this being one of the main reasons that he disapproved the armed resistance of Haji Turangzai against the Raj. He was convinced that the armed struggle would bring more disaster upon the local population who were already facing lot of miseries being the inhabitants of a politically and strategically sensitive province. His simple methods of preaching convinced the Pashtoons that the only panacea for their blood feuds and factionalism is adoption of non-violence as a creed and then strict adherence to it. No other movement had ever received such a tremendous response and popularity as did the Khudai Khidmatgars. Abdul Ghaffar Khan also emphasised communal harmony in the province. Therefore, the membership was kept open to all irrespective of any discrimination of caste, creed, community or religion.

As pointed earlier, initially it was a social reform movement but later on following the events in the rest of India, became a political one. During the Congress' civil disobedience movement (1930-1934) it supported and later on were compelled by the circumstances to merge with the Congress and remained at the forefront of making sacrifices for the motherland. Frequent firing and *lathi* charges on the unarmed, non-violent Khudai Khidmatgars became a routine. Khudai Khidmatgars were beaten, striped and flogged and forced to walk naked through the cordons of the British soldiers who prodded them with rifles and bayonets as they passed. They were physically humiliated on many occasions. All sort of inhumane treatment was perpetuated against the Khudai Khidmatgars. On previous occasions when they had not yet pledged themselves to non-violence all such acts of provocations were avenged by the Pashtoons. However, now they were told to bear all these atrocities with forbearance and courage and not to retaliate. The Khudai Khidmatgars simply followed Abdul Ghaffar Khan and offered no resistance to the government. Subsequent events during the later years proved that the Khudai Khidmatgars followed the principle of non-violence fully and despite provocation from both the colonial government and their political opponents including the Muslim League they did not resort to violence.^x

Pakistan came into being on 14 August 1947. The Khudai Khidmatgars, against their wishes were forced to join a state against which till recent past they were struggling. They simply regarded Pakistan as an electioneering campaign of the Muslim League but now it became a reality. Under the changed circumstances, on 3-4 September 1947, the Khudai Khidmatgars and their affiliated bodies met at Peshawar and pledged their loyalty to the new country.^{xi} The provincial authorities with Abdul Qaiyum as Chief Minister, who was notorious for his anti-Khudai Khidmatgar attitude started a campaign on intimidation and torture against the Khudai Khidmatgars. In June 1948, Abdul Ghaffar Khan was arrested and sentenced to three years rigorous imprisonment. His arrest was followed a ban on the Khudai Khidmatgars and a crack down on the members of the organisation. After the expiry of the three years term, Abdul Ghaffar Khan was held on another charge and sentenced for another three years term. He was released in 1954 and once again arrested in June 1956. On his release in July 1957 Abdul Ghaffar Khan and the like-minded which included Maulana A. H. K. Bashani, G. M. Syed and Mian Iftikhar-ud-din announced their decision to form National Awami Party.^{xii} For a greater period of his remaining life he was at Kabul in self-exile. Abdul Ghaffar Khan died on 20 January 1988 and was buried at Jalalabad (Afghanistan). Abdul Ghaffar Khan left behind his followers who still dominate the N-WFP politics and are playing a positive role in the politics of Pakistan having their new identity as Awami National Party.

ⁱ : Abdul Ghaffar, *Zama Zhwand au Jaddo Jehad* (Pashto) (Kabul, 1983), p. 1.

ⁱⁱ : Sayed Wiqar Ali Shah , *Ethnicity, Islam and Nationalism: Muslim Politics in the North-West Frontier Province, 1937-47* (Karachi, 1999), p. 18; Abdul Ghaffar, *Zama Zhwand*, pp. 94-107.

ⁱⁱⁱ : D. G. Tendulkar, *Abdul Ghaffar Khan* (Bombay, 1967), p. 27.

^{iv} : Sayed Wiqar Ali Shah , 'N-WFP and the Khilafat and Hijrat Movements', *Central Asia*, No. 20, Summer 1987, pp. 121-128.

^v : *ibid.* pp. 128-136.

^{vi} : Shah, *Ethnicity, Islam and Nationalism*, p. 22; Abdul Akbar Khan, 'Autobiography', (unpublished), pp. 8-10.

^{vii} : Abdul Ghaffar, *Zama Zhwand*, pp. 350-351.

^{viii} : Pukhtun, October 1929, p. 14; Abdul Karim Khan, 'The Khudai Khidmatgar (Servants of God)/Red Shirt Movement in the North-West Frontier Province of British India, 1927-1947', (unpublished Ph. D dissertation, University of Hawaii, 1997), p. 60.

^{ix} : 'An Appeal to the Khudai Khidmatgars', Hijab Gul, *Pukhtun*, November 1929, p. 38.

^x : For these details see Shah, *Ethnicity, Islam and Nationalism*, pp. 32-33; *The Frontier Tragedy* (Khilafat Committee Report) (Lahore, 1930), pp. 1-57; Ahmad, *Khudai Khidmatgar Tehreek* (Peshawar, 1991), pp. 182

426; 'Report of Devadas Gandhi on the N-WFP', (1931), F. No. P-16 (1932), pp. 165-199, All India Congress Committee Papers, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Delhi; Warris Khan, *Da Azadi Tehreek* (Pashto) (Peshawar, 1988), pp. 82-84; and, Abdul Wali Khan, *Bacha Khan au Khudai Khidmatgari* (Pashto), (Peshawar, 1993), pp. 95-105.

^{xi} : Tendulkar, *Abdul Ghaffar Khan*, pp. 450-451.

^{xii} Rafique Afzal, *Political Parties in Pakistan 1947-1958* vol. I (Islamabad, 1998), pp. 139-140.