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# The Ghalla Dher Movement: Agrarian agitation in North-West Frontier Province during the first Congress ministry, 1937–39

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*The Ghalla Dher movement which surfaced during the first Congress ministry in the N-WFP of British India not only affected the government but also the regional and trans-regional politics of the time. It gained widespread sympathy and generated discussion on an all-India level. The purpose of this study is to evaluate this movement and thereby help to provide a new and deeper understanding of the politics in the N-WFP, during late colonial rule.*

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**Keywords:** Agrarian movements, Indian National Congress, Khudai Khidmatgars, Pashtoons, socialists

## N-WFP People and Society

The North-West Frontier Province (N-WFP), one of the overwhelming by Muslim majority provinces in British India with its specific Pashtoon identity and particularism, has remained an area of special interest for scholars. The Khudai Khidmatgar movement which dominated the N-WFP politics and society during much of the first half of the twentieth century had roots in the rural areas of the province. The Khudai Khidmatgars mobilised the local inhabitants, and confronted the British authorities in what was thought to be a strategically very important area for British imperialism. By their opposition to the British they came close to the Indian National Congress and this collaboration lasted until the Partition of India in 1947, the Khudai Khidmatgar organisation practically coalescing with the Congress in N-WFP.

The total population of the N-WFP, according to the Census of 1921, was 5,076,476. Of these inhabitants about 93 per cent were Muslims while the remaining 7 per cent were mainly Hindus.<sup>1</sup> The majority of the population of the N-WFP lived in rural areas, with only 16 per cent residing in towns. The rural

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<sup>1</sup> *Census of India 1921, Vol. XIV, North-West Frontier Province, Peshawar, 1922, p. 11.*

population consisted mostly of agriculturists.<sup>2</sup> In the greater part of the province very few Hindus were landowners. Only in Dera Ismail Khan were there some Hindu agriculturists.<sup>3</sup> The bulk of the agricultural population were *khudkash* (self-cultivating) zamindars or those cultivators who took land from the zamindars in return for a share in crops. Then there were the *bakhrakhor* or *ijaradars*, those who received their income from agricultural land but did not cultivate the land themselves or through their relations or servants. They took land from the zamindars for a fixed term at agreed cash rates, and then rented it out to actual cultivators. They were 'neither so frugal nor prosperous', according to S.S. Thorburn, an ex-settlement officer, and a good 20 per cent of them were 'deeply involved in debt, and a large majority habitually live[d] beyond their income'.<sup>4</sup> Next were the big Khans or the landlords,<sup>5</sup> who did not personally cultivate the land but subsisted on rents from tenants. They exercised great influence over the villages, and the British allowed them to enjoy their dominant position in return for their loyalty. The British regarded them as the 'natural leaders' of the people.<sup>6</sup> Under their tutelage were *dehqans*, *hamsayas* and *faqirs* (those who lived on the site or fief of a Khan whose land they cultivated). Then there were the *kasabgars* (artisans) who were usually paid by a customary share of the produce of the harvest, and, in rare cases, were given access to small plots of land to cultivate for themselves.

The British came late to the N-WFP, and it was only in 1849 that they occupied the area. They encouraged individual property holding, which caused a marked shift away from collective ownership among many Pashtoon communities.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 266.

<sup>3</sup> *Census of India 1911, Vol. XIII, North-West Frontier Province*, Peshawar, 1912, p. 65.

<sup>4</sup> The main causes of their sinking into poverty, according to Thorburn, was that the head of the family spent too much on hospitality, earning for him a reputation through it. Moreover, his sons were brought up in idleness and were married early. The 'false pride' of their family background compelled them to refuse to work with their own hands, and all these things finally resulted in their borrowing from Hindu *banias* (returning the principal at double after the harvest) and in some cases even in mortgaging their land. See S.S. Thorburn, *Report on the First Land Revenue Settlement of the Bannu District in the Derajat Division of the Punjab*, Lahore, 1879, p. 59.

<sup>5</sup> 'Khan' is a common title. Most of the Pashtoon like to put it after their names as a mark of distinction to show that they belong to one of the established Pashtoon clans. But here it is used for those who have big holdings in the form of property and land. At the time of the annexation of the province in 1849, the Khans were found mainly in Yusufzai and Khattak areas elsewhere they were known as 'Arbabs'. A few men in the province held the distinct title of 'Nawab'.

<sup>6</sup> For the British government's patronage of the big landlords, see S.A. Rittenberg, *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Pakhtuns: The Independence Movement in India's North-West Frontier Province 1901-1947*, Durham, 1988, pp. 29-41, 43-46.

<sup>7</sup> Prior to the arrival of the British there was collective ownership of the property amongst the Pashtoons. The distribution of land was determined according to the rule laid down in the *Daftar* of Shaikh Milli, a sixteenth century Yusufzai chief. Land was distributed keeping in view the number of male members of a particular tribe. Every four years the land was re-allocated. Those who previously had had less productive lands were given fertile lands and vice versa.

The new landlords were used by the British for gaining political control and consolidating their power. Their services were utilised by the colonial government in the districts in the functioning of judicial and revenue administration, the local government, recruitment for military services and active opposition to any political agitation that might arise. The majority of the rural population, in most cases, were excluded from holding land. They were thus left to work as tenants-at-will, agricultural labourers and service menials.

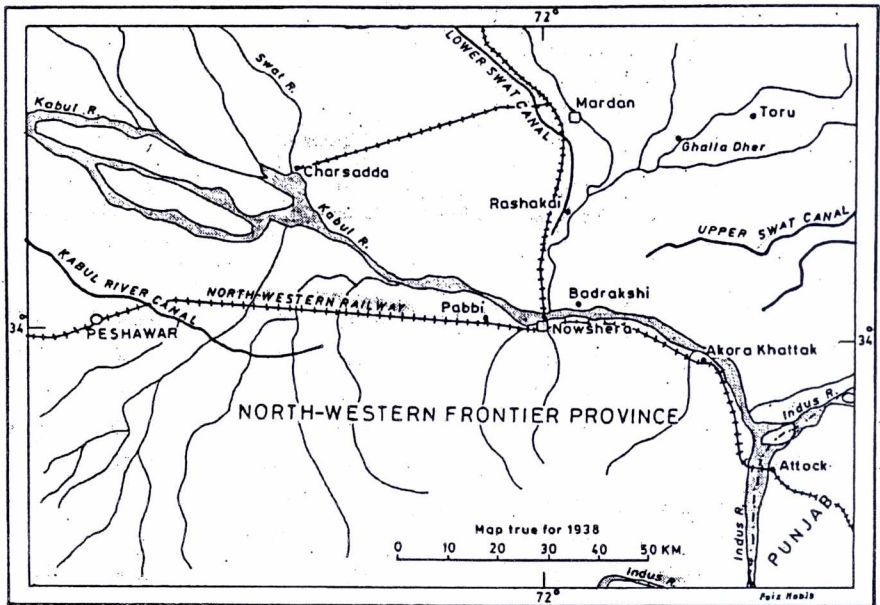
Agrarian unrest had become an important phenomenon throughout India by late 1930s. One of the most important issues before the Indian National Congress was to improve the condition of the peasants. In its Lucknow session, held on 12–14 April 1936, the Congress expressed its conviction that ‘the most important and urgent problem of the country is the appalling poverty, unemployment and indebtedness of the peasantry fundamentally due to antiquated and repressive land tenure and revenue systems’, which had been intensified by the ‘great slump in the prices of agricultural produce’. To the Congress, the ‘final solution’ of the problem was ‘the removal of British imperialistic exploitation and thorough change of the land tenure and revenue systems and recognition by the state of its duty to provide work for the rural unemployed masses’.<sup>8</sup> As agrarian conditions and land revenue systems were different in every province, the provincial Congress committees were directed to help the Congress in developing an agrarian programme for the subcontinent.<sup>9</sup> In its Bombay session, the Congress formulated its agrarian policy and confirmed that it stood for a reform of the system of tenure and revenue and rent and an equitable adjustment of the burden on agricultural land, giving immediate relief to the smaller peasantry by a substantial reduction of agricultural rent and revenue paid by them. The Congress asked for tax exemption on uneconomic holdings. In its annual session held at Faizpur (December 1936), the Congress reiterated its earlier demands and called for a radical change in the existing land revenue system, which laid an ‘intolerable’ burden upon the peasantry.<sup>10</sup> Like other

<sup>8</sup> Proceedings of the 49th session of the INC, Lucknow, 12–14 April 1936, vide N.N. Mitra, *Indian Annual Register*, 1936, I, Calcutta, 1936, p. 250.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> The Congress considered the following steps essential for the agrarian uplift of the peasantry: (i) Rent and revenue should be readjusted having regard to present conditions and there should be substantial reduction in both. (ii) Uneconomic holdings should be exempted from rent or land tax. (iii) Agricultural incomes should be assessed for income tax like all other incomes, on a progressive scale, subject to a prescribed minimum. (iv) Canal and other irrigation rates should be substantially lowered. (v) All feudal dues and levies and forced labour should be abolished, and demands other than rent should be made illegal. (vi) Fixity of tenure with heritable rights along with the right to build houses and plant trees should be provided for all tenants. (vii) An effort should be made to introduce cooperative farming. (viii) The crushing burden of rural debt should be removed. Special tribunals should be appointed to inquire into this and all debts, which are unconscionable or beyond the capacity of the peasants to pay, should be liquidated. Meanwhile, a moratorium should be declared and steps should be taken to provide cheap credit facilities. (ix) Arrears of rent for previous years should generally be wiped out. (x) Common pasture lands should be provided, and the rights of the people

## GHALLA DHER AND ITS REGION



Source: Drawn by Faiz Habib.

parts of India during the election campaign in 1936, the Congress approached the peasantry in the N-WFP and sought their help and support. It promised to reduce the revenue rates and to give the peasants *takavi* loans, which they would not have to repay. Following the implementation of the Government of India Act of 1935, the N-WFP, like other Provinces of British India, came under the so-called system of Provincial Autonomy. A wider franchise was introduced and it seemed as if the general population of the province, hitherto neglected, was for the first time being brought to the forefront of the Frontier politics.<sup>11</sup> In the N-WFP, the elections were held in the first week of February 1937. The Congress emerged as the largest party but pending the decision of its central organisation it refused to form a ministry for the time being. However, the deadlock was soon resolved and the Congress authorised its provincial organisation to form ministries in those

in tanks, wells, ponds, forests and the like recognised, and no encroachment on these rights should be permitted. (xi) Arrears of rent should be recoverable in the same manner as civil debts and not by ejection. (xii) There should be statutory provision for securing a living wage and suitable working conditions for agricultural labourers. (xiii) Peasant unions should be recognised.' See Resolutions Passed by the 58th session of the INC, Faizpur, December 1936, G-85 (II) 1936, All-India Congress Committee Papers, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, pp. 17-17a.

<sup>11</sup> Mohammad Yunus, *Frontier Speaks*, Lahore, 1942, p. 182.

provinces where they were in a majority. On 7 September 1937, Dr Khan Sahib, the Congress leader, was sworn in as the new Premier of the N-WFP.

After the assumption of power, the provincial Congress decided to pay attention to the long-standing grievances of the peasantry. According to official estimates, in the late 1930s, the agricultural indebtedness of the rural masses of India was about ₹9,000 million of which of ₹90 million were incurred in the Frontier Province. The rural classes of the N-WFP were paying approximately ₹10 million annually as interest, which amounted to about six times the land revenue that they paid to the government. 'This state of affairs', remarked Qazi Ataullah, the Education and Revenue Minister, 'is undoubtedly most unsatisfactory and calls for an immediate redress and relief'. Elaborating on the pitiable condition of the peasants, Qazi Ataullah castigated their exploitation by:

those who are a little more literate or more intelligent and while they [the landlords] all are fed by him, he [the peasant] himself remains starving, half naked and steeped in ignorance. Under such circumstances the additional burden of agricultural indebtedness on him is so pressing that it is a duty of a civilised Government to come to his rescue and do something for him.<sup>12</sup>

The Congress ministry in the Frontier Province introduced and passed a set of legislation for the welfare of the peasants. It included the N-WFP Agriculturist Debtors' Relief Bill (1938), N-WFP Agricultural Produce Market Bill (1938), and the Teri Dues Regulations Repealing Bill (1938). Moreover, the abolition of honorary magistrates, *lambardars*, *zaildars*, *naubati chaukidari* and the forfeiture of the *inams* provided some further relief to the peasants.<sup>13</sup> The big Khans, threatened by the pro-peasant steps of the Frontier ministry, took these steps as a direct threat to their privilege and position in the province. The peasants were on the other hand, greatly enthused by the passage of the legislation. The Congress promises made during election days were taken as gospel truth by the peasants and led the tenants to 'believe that once it came to power, they would no longer have to pay rent'. The Frontier Congress, therefore, soon found itself in a difficult situation: it had to act differently and maintain law and order (and so protect the landlords), which clashed with its image as a self-proclaimed representative of the poor peasants. As in some other parts of India, the ministry in the N-WFP had to face exasperated Congress workers, who were out in the streets against their own government, demanding further measures of relief as were promised during the election campaign.<sup>14</sup> The Frontier Congress ministry faced an awkward situation when peasants began

<sup>12</sup> Qazi Ataullah Khan on Agriculturists Debtor's Relief Bill, 18 March 1938, in *Provincial Legislative Assembly Debates* (Peshawar, 1939), pp. 737–38.

<sup>13</sup> For details of these measures see Sayed Wiqar Ali Shah, *Ethnicity, Islam and Nationalism: Muslim Politics in the North-West Frontier Province, 1937–1947*, Karachi, 1999, pp. 62–65, 72–75.

<sup>14</sup> R. Coupland, *Indian Politics, 1936–1942*, London, 1943, pp. 126–41.

to resist the collection of revenue. By September 1938, the collection was ₹400,000 below normal and in Peshawar alone the outstanding revenue and water rates were up 40 per cent. The ministry's attitude thereupon changed and in order to avoid a financial crisis and realise the revenue arrears, it was compelled to take resolute action.<sup>15</sup>

### Unrest in Ghalla Dher

The most serious agrarian outbreak which the Congress ministry faced was in Ghalla Dher, a small village near Kalpani River in the Mardan district.<sup>16</sup> It had a population of approximately 1,000. The residents of the village were mostly Muslim peasants with occupancy rights, that is, they could retain possession of the land so long as they abided by the local obligations placed on them and their heirs. Only a small number of them were Hindu zamindars.<sup>17</sup> Most of the lands in Ghalla Dher belonged to Nawab Hamidullah Khan of Toru, an absentee landlord, who used to collect heavy rents and also some 'illegal taxes' from the peasants.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> S.A. Rittenberg, 'Independence Movement in India's North-West Frontier Province, 1901–1947', Columbia University PhD Thesis, 1977, p. 244.

<sup>16</sup> During my research on Frontier politics, I found serious gaps in the earlier writings on the area. For instance, S.A. Rittenberg in his book *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Pakhtuns: The Independence Movement in India's North-West Frontier Province 1901–1947* (Durham, 1988) has devoted only one paragraph to the agrarian unrest in the Frontier. A.K. Gupta's book *North-West Frontier Province Legislature and Freedom Struggle 1932–47* (Delhi, 1976) contains only two pages. Erland Jansson's, *India, Pakistan or Pakhtunistan* (Uppsala, 1981) has just one and a half pages. And Mukulika Banerjee's *The Pathan Unarmed* (Karachi, 2000) makes no mention of agrarian unrest at all. In my own *Ethnicity, Islam and Nationalism*, op. cit., it occupies a little over five pages (pp. 65–71), the present paper being its enlarged version.

<sup>17</sup> Gurudasmal, head of the Talwar family, was a big zamindar of Ghalladher, helpful to the police and a licensed possessor of firearms. Three of his sons joined the National Movement. His eldest son, Jamuna Das became a Congress MLA; and his second son, Hari Kishan, mounted the gallows on 10 June 1931 for a botched attempt to assassinate the Punjab Governor Montomorency. The third son, Bhagat Ram, a Khudai Khidmatgar, was active in the Ghalladher movement and was later to escort Subhas Chandra Bose to Kabul in his famous flight from India to Germany. See for further details, Shah, *Ethnicity, Islam and Nationalism*, p. 88, f.n. 90.

<sup>18</sup> It was a common practice in the area that after the harvest, the crops were divided into two parts: the share of the landlord and that of the peasant. The agents of the Nawab, present on the occasion, abusing their authority, demanded more and more from the peasant's share in the name of patwaris and other related revenue officers. Then, the peasant had to provide for the guests of the Nawab and for his cattle; many other deductions were also made from the peasant's share. Another tax called *Tora* was levied on both the bride and the bridegroom, irrespective of their social status, on the occasion of their marriage, and it was to be given to the Nawab. *Begar* (forced labour without any wages) was demanded and in cases of disputes and quarrels among the tillers, the Nawab usually exercised his judicial powers imposing fines and sometimes physical punishments thus augmenting his treasury and at the same time striking terror among the peasants. See Warris Khan, *Da Azadi Tehreek* (Pashto), Peshawar, University Books Agency, 1988; Ram Saran Nagina, *Surkhposh Kisan ya Tehreek Ghalla*

In most cases, the poorer tillers and share-croppers lacked the means of transport required for access to the markets and were compelled to sell their produce to the local grain-dealer immediately after the harvest when the prices of grain were the lowest during the year. Often the beneficiaries were either the Hindu *mahajans* (moneylenders) or the Muslim Khans as they alone were equipped with storage capacity and means of transport and were in no hurry to sell their stocks. They could afford to wait until the prices rose again in the middle of the cultivating season when they could either send their produce to the market or lend it as seed or food to poor villagers on exorbitant terms.<sup>19</sup> If the peasants decided to sell the produce themselves, they fell victims to the high-handedness of the 'middlemen', who dominated the markets. The weights used by these middlemen were faulty and they used all kinds of ways to defraud the peasants. There were certain deductions made from the produce, which reminded one of the proverbial monkey who distributed cheese between two cats. 'They take off a portion of the produce as allowance for the weighman, another portion as dues to the *chaukidar* and still another as a cut for *dharamsala*, mosque or *patshala*, as the case may be', remarked Mohammad Abbas Khan, the Minister for Industries in the Frontier Cabinet. The peasants were left with no other option but to accept the meagre amount offered by the *mahajans* or to take their produce to another market which meant the repetition of all those deductions already mentioned.<sup>20</sup>

After the death of Nawab Hamidullah Khan, his wealth and belongings including his land in Ghalla Dher was divided among his four sons. Azimullah Khan, the Western-educated youngest son of the late Nawab, appointed some powerful men amongst his tenants as his agents to look after the estate. In spring 1938, the new Nawab, whom Governor Sir George Cunningham described as a 'notoriously bad landlord',<sup>21</sup> provoked a dispute with one of his tenants in Ghalla Dher.<sup>22</sup> Exasperated at the particular tenant's intransigence, the Nawab retaliated by imposing fines on the entire village of Ghalla Dher, and this sparked an agitation against the Nawab.

The people of Ghalla Dheri had become politically conscious ever since their participation in the Khudai Khidmatgar movement. They had supported Amir Mohammad Khan, the Congress candidate in the 1937 elections, instead of the

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*Dher* (Urdu), Peshawar, np, 1939, and Bhagat Ram, *The Talwars of Pathan Land, and Subhas Chandra's Great Escape*, Delhi, 1976, *passim*.

<sup>19</sup> For comparable conditions, see Rajat and Ratna Roy, 'Zamindars and Jotedars: A Study of Rural Politics in Bengal', in *The Making of Agrarian Policy in British India 1770-1900*, ed. Burton Stein, Delhi, 1992, p. 219.

<sup>20</sup> Mohammad Abbas Khan on the NWFP Agricultural Produce Market Bill, *PLAD*, 18 March 1938, pp. 85-87, 119.

<sup>21</sup> Governor's Report, 8 August 1938, Mss. EUR. D. 670/14, Sir George Cunningham Papers, India Office Library and Records, London.

<sup>22</sup> A bullock of one Gulzada having been carried away by Nawab's men, Gulzada uprooted the newly planted orchard of the Nawab and threw the plants into the river.

Nawab himself, against whom they had several complaints. They protested over his imposition of high rents and refused to pay the fines he imposed. In June, the Nawab obtained eviction orders from the civil court, but failed to get them implemented. The tenants resisted the eviction and when finally evicted, returned and cultivated some of the resumed lands.<sup>23</sup> On 13 June, the district administration, supporting the Nawab, arrested the ringleaders of the kisans.<sup>24</sup>

Before going into the details of the events, it will be useful to mention briefly the quality of local leadership of the Ghalla Dher movement, the support from the political parties and the initial successes of the movement against the landlords. As for the leaders of the peasant agitation, we can clearly divide them into two groups: those who personally suffered from oppression and exploitation and those who came as members of the Frontier Congress Socialist Party (whose ranks then included Communists as well) to uphold the peasants' cause. At the initial stages it was the former, constituting the local leadership who were most effective. The leaders of the latter group assumed a bigger role after the local movement had developed. Mian Akbar Shah, in an interview given to the author, claimed that there was complete harmony and cordial relations between the leaders and the peasants and the latter followed what the leaders told them to do.<sup>25</sup>

The support from the nationalist organisation came later. Here mention should be made of the newly reorganised Frontier Muslim League. Unlike the Bengal Provincial Muslim League leaders who tried to 'wean away' the peasants from the influence of the Kisan Sabhas,<sup>26</sup> the local League leaders initially supported the kisans, but 'it soon became apparent', reported Cunningham, that 'as landlords they cannot afford to encourage disrespect for law among tenants'.<sup>27</sup> Initially, the Ghalla Dheris succeeded in winning over the support of the rank and file of the Khudai Khidmatgars and in attracting considerable notice from the Frontier leftists. It is interesting to note how the local workers utilised the devices of *Satyagraha* and the boycott of arbitration courts set up by the Frontier Congress ministry led by Dr Khan Sahib. They also approached the leaders of the Frontier Congress Socialist Party (formed in 1935 at Peshawar). Leaders such as Mian Akbar Shah (Badrashi), Mufti Abdur Rahim Popalzai (Peshawar), Mian Mukarram Shah (Dag Ismail Khan), Mian Mohammad Shah (Pabbi) and Ajun Khan (Akora Khattak) were approached by Warris Khan and some of his friends from Ghalla Dher. Under the presidentship of Sahib Shah, president of the Ghalla Dher Congress Committee, a meeting was convened, attended by most of the villagers of Ghalla Dher. It was resolved to resist the eviction and copies of the resolutions were sent to Dr Khan Sahib and

<sup>23</sup> Governor's Report, 8 August 1938, Mss. EUR. D. 670/14.

<sup>24</sup> Nagina, *Surkhposh Kisan*, pp. 23–25.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Mian Akbar Shah in Badrashi (Nowshera), 8 September 1984.

<sup>26</sup> Binay Bhushan Chaudhuri, 'Agrarian Movements in Bengal and Bihar, 1919–39', in *Peasant Struggles in India*, ed. A.R. Desai, Bombay, 1979, p. 350.

<sup>27</sup> Governor's Report, 9 June 1939, Mss. EUR. D. 670/15.

Ghulam Mohammad Khan Lundkharh, President PCC, Amir Mohammad Khan, the local MLA, and to some leading newspapers of the province.<sup>28</sup> However, no reply was received from the Provincial Congress Committee. Amir Mohammad Khan argued in favour of a peaceful settlement between the Nawab and the tenants. For this he was castigated by Amir Khan, secretary of the Ghalla Dher Congress Committee, who accused him of protecting his class interests at the expense of the poor peasants.<sup>29</sup> Warris Khan was empowered by the local Congress committee to enlist volunteers to carry on the *Satyagraha*. Kisan *Sabhas* were organised on the pattern of Congress *Satyagraha* committees to reinforce the movement. The youth were asked to dye their clothes red and resist the 'stooges of imperialism'. Warris Khan warned the intended *satyagrahis* to be prepared for the rigours of jails and other kinds of harassment from the authorities. A 'war council' was formed and a whirlwind tour of the adjacent areas was undertaken by several *satyagrahis*.<sup>30</sup>

In August 1938, the movement intensified. The Frontier Congress Socialists were in the forefront of the demonstrations. The Congress government faced a complex situation. The Premier, as the custodian of law and order, had to prevent any breakdown of the system as a result of the agitation and at the same time he had to take into consideration the interest of his party workers. Perturbed by the interference of the Congress Socialists, Dr Khan Sahib paid an *impromptu* visit to Ghalla Dher. The kisans nominated Mian Akbar Shah, Bhagat Ram and Faqir Mohammad to negotiate on their behalf. They met the Premier and demanded from him a complete ban on *begar*; withdrawal of *tora* (marriage levy); a ban on the eviction policy of the Nawab; abolition of *malba* (tax meant for the guests of the Nawab); complete restriction on illegal fines and physical harassment of the peasants and an end to the duties of sweepers forced upon the tillers of the area. But the negotiations failed.<sup>31</sup>

The Khudai Khidmatgars were in a fix. Their high command accused the Congress Socialists of creating hatred between the classes and weakening the Congress organisation in the province. These views were endorsed by the Frontier Government officials. The Governor also believed that the Congress Socialists were behind the movement and expressed his displeasure over the situation.<sup>32</sup> The Mardan District Congress Committee convened a special meeting to discuss the issue. It condemned those who had taken part in the Ghalla

<sup>28</sup> Bhagat Ram to Ghulam Mohammad Khan, 27 July 1938; Nagina, *Surkhposh Kisan*, pp. 22–23.

<sup>29</sup> Warris, *Azadi Tehreek*, pp. 170–71.

<sup>30</sup> The members included Mian Akbar Shah, Maulana Abdur Rahim Popalzai, Mian Mohammad Shah, Mian Mukarram Shah, Khurram Khan, Lal Din, Hakim Khan, Bhagat Ram, Warris Khan, Abdul Ghafoor Aatish, Ajun Khan, Bakhshi Faqir Chand Vaid, Hazrat Gul, Afzal Khan and Sahib Shah. See Warris, *Azadi Tehreek*, p. 177; and, Nagina, *Surkhposh Kisan*, p. 19.

<sup>31</sup> Nagina, *Surkhposh Kisan*, pp. 35–36.

<sup>32</sup> Governor's Report, 23 August 1938, Mss. EUR. D. 670/14.

Dher disorders and appealed to the Congress Socialists not to create any friction between the landlords and the peasants, for it might lead to endless blood feuds and disturb the peaceful atmosphere of the province. They threatened them with penalties, including expulsion from the Congress organisation.<sup>33</sup> Like the Provincial Congress Committees in other parts of the country, which developed differences with the Kisan Sabhas and accused them of trying to establish a 'kind of Kisan raj',<sup>34</sup> the Frontier Provincial Congress Committee, at its meeting held at Abbottabad in August instructed Congressmen and Khudai Khidmatgars not to take part in the Socialists' *satyagraha* against the landlords of Ghalla Dher.<sup>35</sup> The local rank and file of the Congress was appalled at the hostility shown by the ministry towards the peasants.<sup>36</sup> As Khudai Khidmatgars they had been taught to help the oppressed against the oppressor. It was their sacrifices that had enabled the ministers to enjoy their positions. They were angry at the ministers (three out of four of whom were landlords themselves) for supporting the Khans. When most of the tillers in Ghalla Dher were arrested and their crops were left untended, some Khudai Khidmatgars from the adjoining areas came to their rescue and cultivated the lands of the arrested peasants. This naturally gave moral strength to the peasants in their struggle against the landlords.<sup>37</sup>

The Frontier government could not remain a silent spectator for long. It was argued in the local English press that delay in action would be dangerous for the peace and tranquillity of Mardan and indeed the whole of the N-WFP.<sup>38</sup> The government at last struck. It arrested the main leaders including Mian Akbar Shah, Abdur Rahim Popalzai, Bhagat Ram, Sahib Shah, Achraj Ram Ghumandi, Indar Gul, Ram Saran Nagina, Warris Khan, Umar Khan, Mian Mukarram Shah, Khanzada, Mira Khan and Amin-ul-Haq. The government also promulgated Section 144 in the Mardan district and adjoining areas, prohibiting political gatherings and meetings.<sup>39</sup> The arrested leaders, on their refusal to furnish

<sup>33</sup> *Tribune*, Lahore, 12 August 1938; and CID Diaries Mardan, 26 August 1938, F. No. 132, Special Branch Peshawar, p. 159.

<sup>34</sup> Binay Bhushan Chaudhuri, 'Agrarian Movements in Bengal and Bihar', p. 365. For more details, see *ibid.*, pp. 365–67.

<sup>35</sup> *Khyber Mail*, Peshawar, 21 August 1938.

<sup>36</sup> 'One who knows' commented in the *Khyber Mail*, Peshawar, 9 September: 'it is [a] pity that under the advice of their Socialist friends, who, in their search for cheap notoriety and leadership, are ever eager to fish in the troubled waters and draw their inspirations from the works of Lenin and Marx instead of looking to their immediate surroundings, they decided to resort to extra-constitutional methods and accordingly launched upon a campaign of civil disobedience. Several of them have forced the hands of the authorities to arrest them because of their active interference with the lawful and peaceful activity of those of their fellow tenants who would not make common cause with them.'

<sup>37</sup> Nagina, *Surkhposh Kisan*, p. 64.

<sup>38</sup> Abdul Khaliq Qureshi, 'Agrarian Trouble in Mardan', *Khyber Mail*, 28 August 1938.

<sup>39</sup> Warris, *Azadi Tehreek*, p. 181; and, *Khyber Mail*, 31 July and 4 September 1938.

security, were sentenced to rigorous imprisonment of six months to two years. On 3 September the Governor observed:<sup>40</sup>

Security proceedings have been instituted against the members of the 'War Council' who are organising the agrarian trouble in Mardan.... The Socialists are making propaganda out of the incident to the effect that Dr. Khan Sahib, the representative of the poor, is imprisoning those who endeavour to improve the lot of peasant... [and the] present indications are that the Chief Minister will succeed in securing the support of his party for the action taken, but there is no doubt that the Socialists are trying to disaffect some of the Congress rank and file...

The arrested leaders were sent to Peshawar, Dera Ismail Khan and Haripur jails.<sup>41</sup> On 30 August, the Nawab, with the help of the law enforcing agencies, made another attempt to get hold of the disputed land and hand it over to new tenants brought in from other parts of the province. The former tenants present on the occasion offered resistance but were arrested. Their arrest was followed by the *Satyagraha* by the female kin of the arrested tenants, about 100 in number. With red flags in their hands and Holy Quran on their heads, they resisted the forcible entry of the Nawab's men; and the police, thereupon resorted to lathi charges which caused injuries to about twenty women and children. In a press communiqué the Provincial Government denied the fact of any atrocities being committed against women in Ghalla Dher: 'On their refusal to [disperse], [the Magistrate present] ordered the police to arrest them. This was followed by about a hundred women throwing themselves in front of the plough-cattle, causing a stampede, which resulted in a few women and a child receiving some injuries...'<sup>42</sup> Ultimately, the infuriated official 'invaders', having failed to gain the possession of the land, fell on the standing crop and destroyed it.<sup>43</sup>

On 5 September, Abdul Ghaffar Khan, accompanied by some Khudai Khidmatgar stalwarts including Arbab Abdul Ghafoor, Baz Mohammad Khan, Samin Jan and Saif-ul-Muluk, visited Ghalla Dher. He met the tenants present there and inquired about their grievances. The tenants, however, refused to talk with him until their arrested comrades were released.<sup>44</sup>

When the news of the incidents at Ghalla Dher and the conviction of the political prisoners became known, the supporters of the tenants in and outside

<sup>40</sup> Governor's Report, 3 September 1938, Mss. EUR D. 670/14.

<sup>41</sup> Interviews with Mian Akbar Shah in Badrashi, 8 September 1984; Haji Mohammad Asim in Nowshera, 30 October 1984; and Warris Khan in Rashakai, 3 June 1987. Also see *Khyber Mail*, 28 August and 25 September 1938; and *Tribune*, 25 August 1938.

<sup>42</sup> 'Press Communiqué Issued by the Provincial Government on Lathi Charge on the Women', *Khyber Mail*, 18 September 1938.

<sup>43</sup> Dr Khan Sahib's reply to Jamuna Das Talwar, in *PLAD*, 5 November 1938, pp. 240-68. Also see Warris, *Azadi Tehreek*, p. 190; and, Nagina, *Surkhposh Kisan*, pp. 64-65.

<sup>44</sup> Nagina, *Surkhposh Kisan*, p. 68.

the province<sup>45</sup> came out championing the cause of the arrested Congress workers, noted Khudai Khidmatgars, and Socialists, and accusing the Congress ministry of insolence. Some moderate local Congress leaders offered their services to being about an honourable accord between the warring parties. Meanwhile, Bakhshi Faqir Chand, still out of prison, managed to reach Delhi. He appeared before the Political Prisoners Conference, held on 23 September 1938, attended by the Congress Premiers, including Dr Khan Sahib. He narrated the whole account of the happenings in Ghalla Dher and condemned the 'insolent' behaviour of the Frontier ministry towards the tenants there. His speech created a stir among the members, some of whom, including Acharya Narendra Dev, Munshi Ahmad Din, Syed Hasan Butt, Yameen, Comrade J. Bokhari, Ch. Sher Jang, B.P.L. Bedi, Comrade Mohan Lal Saskena, Bankum Chatterji and Comrade Sampoomanand, accused the Frontier ministry of high-handedness. In reply, Dr Khan Sahib made a 'courageous speech' and denounced the 'organisers of the agrarian trouble at Ghalla Dher and asserted that the basic principles of the law must be sustained'.<sup>46</sup>

The *Khyber Mail* of 2 October 1938 published an editorial by 'an ex-Socialist' which eulogised the 'courageous' stand of Dr Khan Sahib in Delhi.<sup>47</sup>

However much one may differ from the politics of Frontier's Chief Minister one cannot help admiring Dr. Khan Sahib's bravery and truthfulness. He has the courage of his conviction and like, a true Pathan, is not afraid of facing the multitude if in his judgement, his action is based on the bedrock of truth and justice. These qualities he has demonstrated in a most convincing manner by his able defence of Government's attitude towards the so-called Kisan civil disobedience movement at Ghalla Dher when a resolution on the subject strongly condemning his Government was under discussion at the Political Prisoners Conference recently held at Delhi.

The legitimacy of the tenants' demands was, however, recognized when the All India Socialist Party deputed Acharya Narendra Dev, Munshi Ahmad Din and M.R. Masani to inquire into the grievances of the peasantry in the N-WFP and to work out a solution. In October, the delegation arrived in Peshawar and

<sup>45</sup> These included Frontier Congress Socialist Party; Provincial Kisan Sabha; Hazara Congress Committee; Peshawar Naujawan Sabha; Sweepers Union, Bannu; Kohat Congress Committee; Rawalpindi Congress Socialist Party; Municipal Employees Union, Rawalpindi; Motor Union, Rawalpindi; Socialist Party, Lahore; Socialist Party, Amritsar, and Kisan Sabha, Bihar. They were only a few of those who demanded from the Congress high command that they give special attention to Ghalla Dher. The Socialists from Dera Ismail Khan, Khanpur, Khalsa, Peshawar, Rawalpindi, Amritsar, Gujranwala, Lyallpur, Jullunder, Batala Patna, and many other parts of the country resolved to send volunteers to participate in the movement. See Nagina, *Surkhposh Kisan*, pp. 71-72; and, *Khyber Mail*, 4 September 1938.

<sup>46</sup> Governor's Report, 7 October 1938, Mss. EUR. D. 670/14.

<sup>47</sup> *Khyber Mail*, Peshawar, 2 October 1938.

met Dr Khan Sahib who assured them of his co-operation.<sup>48</sup> They, were however, not allowed to visit Ghalla Dher as the Frontier Premier would not tolerate 'outside interference'.<sup>49</sup> But in November 1938 on Mahatma Gandhi's initiative all the convicted persons in the Ghalla Dher agitation were released unconditionally.<sup>50</sup> Dr Khan Sahib also put under ban all the illegal taxes levied by the Nawab and promised to improve the general conditions of peasantry in due course.

### Conclusion

The Ghalla Dher movement remains an important episode in the history of the N-WFP. The traditional Pashtoon egalitarianism seems to have been a major factor in blocking class formation in the N-WFP. In the same vein, one would suggest that the Pashtoon society seems to have exercised a cushioning effect on inter-religious differences which helped to discourage communalisation in the province. The prominent leaders of the movement came from various sections of Pashtoon society. Along with the poor masses, this movement included members from the Pashtoon intelligentsia, and some very important religious figures. Irrespective of their belonging to various religious or social groups they supported the cause of the poor peasants of Ghalla Dher against the Nawab and his accomplices. It was the joint struggle of the local Khudai Khidmatgars and the Frontier Socialists that enabled the peasants to press their demands in a systematic manner, which eventually compelled the central leadership of the Congress and Mahatma Gandhi to personally intervene and work out a strategy to end the deadlock between the peasants and the provincial Congress ministry.

A remarkable feature of the Ghalla Dher movement was that, in the first place, the tenants remained peaceful and did not resort to violence. Although, the majority of the peasants were illiterate, they were politically conscious because they had taken active part in the *Satyagraha* during the Congress civil disobedience movement of 1930–34, and were aware of the techniques of unarmed resistance against the Raj. First, they tried to employ these techniques in the Ghalla Dher movement. They were forcibly ejected from their houses, beaten up by the police and even their womenfolk were insulted, an act of high provocation to the Pashtoons, but they remained peaceful and did not retaliate. Second, the movement did not accentuate the Hindu–Muslim divide and no communal colour was given to it, unlike what was seen in the Kisan movement in contemporary Bengal. Members of the Talwar family of Ghalla Dher fully participated in the demonstrations organised in support of the peasants' cause. Bhagat Ram Talwar was one of

<sup>48</sup> Nagina, *Surkhposh Kisan*, p. 88; A.K. Gupta, *North-West Frontier Province Legislature and Freedom Struggle 1932–47*, Delhi, 1976, p. 96.

<sup>49</sup> Dr Khan Sahib's reply to Mehr Chand Khanna, 16 November 1938, in *PLAD*, pp. 797–98.

<sup>50</sup> M.K. Gandhi to M.R. Masani, 9 November 1938, in *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 69, Ahmedabad, 1977, p. 109; and *Khyber Mail*, 30 October 1938.

the most prominent leaders of the movement and was given a central position in the organising committee. Bakhshi Faqir Chand was directed to inform the prominent leaders of the central organisation of the Congress about the 'high-handedness' of the provincial Congress ministry and to seek their support and sympathy for the peasants' cause. Interestingly, the leaders of the newly organised Muslim League initially supported the movement. But soon they found themselves in a baffling situation: Being big Khans, themselves, they could not tolerate the extension of the peasant movement to their own areas. So they decided to withdraw their support of the Ghalla Dher movement and for the remaining period remained silent spectators. Third, no incidents of tenants' forcible entry into landlords' houses or granaries were reported. Most of the leaders of the Ghalla Dher movement were highly educated and they exhorted the peasants to focus on their legitimate demands and not to resort to violence. Throughout the movement they kept the peasants under their control and organised the protest demonstrations in a disciplined manner. Fourth, Ghalla Dher had shown the peasants that when united, they could be strong enough to oppose the government and rid themselves of the illegal exactions of the Khans and the landlords. We must remember that most of the active participants of the movement were Khudai Khidmatgars. They firmly believed in principles of social justice and they were taught to help the oppressed against the oppressor but with non-violent means. Fifth, the leaders of the movement focused on the unity of the peasants because they knew that once united the peasants could force the ministry to accept their demands. The provincial government which earlier paid no heed to the demands of the peasants was compelled under the circumstances to take steps to protect the rights of the Ghalla Dheris. All illegal taxes were abolished and the tillers were promised due share in the produce of the land. Further, the forcible eviction of the peasants came to an end. The Ghalla Dher peasants thus gained substantially from their joint struggle and this created more confidence among them. Sixth, it was at Ghalla Dher that the Khudai Khidmatgars defied their central leaders for the first time, and probably for the last also. The refusal of the peasants to talk to Abdul Ghaffar Khan before the release of their leaders shook the provincial Congress and the Khudai Khidmatgar leadership, while their own threat to expel the leaders of the movement proved to be an empty gesture. Lastly, another noteworthy feature of the Ghalla Dher movement was that most of the Ulema, belonging to the Khudai Khidmatgar organisation, also supported the peasant movement and used Islamic and Pashtoon symbols, without making it a communal issue, unlike what was happening in contemporary Bengal.<sup>51</sup> While the caste system, caste ranking and superior and inferior rights to

<sup>51</sup> J. Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947*, Cambridge, 1994, pp. 55-102, 105-07, 150-55, 173-90; Tanika Sarkar, *Bengal 1928-1934: The Politics of Protest*, Delhi, 1987, pp. 38-39, 156-57; Partha Chatterji, 'Agrarian Relations and Communalism in Bengal, 1926-1935', in *Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha, Vol. I, Delhi, 1994, pp. 9-38.

land undoubtedly complicated agrarian struggles in Bengal and Bihar,<sup>52</sup> these did not play any role in the Ghalla Dher movement.

Eventually the provincial Congress organisation and the Khudai Khidmatgar leadership had to change their policies. As pointed out earlier, all illegal extraction and taxes were abolished and more equitable legislation to protect tenant rights was enacted.<sup>53</sup> These and other similar positive measures prevented the emergence of further agrarian unrest in the N-WFP and when Muftiabad agitation started a few months later, it did not attract the Khudai Khidmatgars and other likeminded groups in the same way as had been seen a few months earlier in the Ghalla Dher movement.<sup>54</sup> Until the partition of India in August 1947, there was no other significant Kisan agitation in the Frontier, while almost all leaders of the Ghalla Dher movement remained staunch partisans of the freedom struggle.

<sup>52</sup> Binay Bhushan Chaudhuri, 'Agrarian Movements in Bengal and Bihar', p. 368.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Sayed Waqar Ali Shah, *Ethnicity, Islam and Nationalism*, pp. 62–65, 72–75, as cited earlier.

<sup>54</sup> The Muftiabad agitation in summer 1939 had, however, some interest of its own since it was led by Dr Khan Sahib's eldest son, Utaidullah, which led to his own arrest and that of a number of Socialists; they were, however, released in July (see Shah, *Ethnicity, Islam and Nationalism*, pp. 71–72).