

Khuda-i Khidmatgar: Pashtun non-violent resistance force (1929–1948)

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Origins and Structure

The Khuda-i Khidmatgar (KK), in the Pashto language “Servants of God,” was a unique formation as an unarmed resistance force with roots in an Islamic interpretation of non-violent politics. It pledged itself to non-violent resistance to British rule and to the reform of Pashtun, also known as Pathan society (the dominant ethnolinguistic group in eastern and southern Afghanistan and in the Northwest Frontier (NWF) Province of today’s Pakistan). Launched in 1929 as the interventionist wing of a broader social reform and Pashtun youth movement, the KK was banned in 1948, following independence from British rule and the partition of the subcontinent. At different points in its brief 18-year history, the KK was partly the representative office of the NWF section of the Indian National Congress (Congress); at other moments it was a social welfare organization, as well as an unarmed, rurally based, anti-colonial protest force. At its peak in the 1930s, KK membership was estimated at 25,000, consisting mostly of men but also a few hundred women. Membership was open primarily to Pashtuns, but though most of the KK members and office holders were Muslims, there were also some Hindu and Sikh recruits. Despite being a voluntary

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civil movement with an explicitly pacifist and reformist agenda, the KK was often referred to as an army because of its organizational characteristics and institutional structure. Yet, as evident from press reports in the 1930s, the KK was more often suspected to be allied to the Bolsheviks, as a military-like protest and resistance force.

Background to the Region's Colonization

The rising political disturbances and clan-based feuds and violence in the region at the beginning of the twentieth century was a direct consequence of colonial laws and interference with the traditional land distribution system of the Pashtuns, known as *wesh*, and its related rules of social authority and ownership. The annexation of the NWF Province region bordering Afghanistan in the second half of the nineteenth century gave way to the emergence of small landed elites, patronized and appointed by the British, who controlled and administered the province on behalf of the British in return for favors and privileges. The ruling elite emerged as a group of powerful landlords who fought with each other and increased rivalry among their clans. Ignoring traditional tribal authorities such as the *jirga* and introducing their own methods of punishment and control, including levies, fines, and even imprisonment, they gradually created a new culture of conflict and its own rules of settlement. The *jirga's* traditional focus on limiting conflicts and blame, and the practice of resolving feuds without punishment, soon diminished in relevance.

Special regulations were introduced in the NWF Province to curb what was termed in colonial vocabulary as tribal violence, unrest, and inter-clan fighting. These regulations, such as the Frontier Crimes Regulation Act or the Tranquility Act, first introduced in 1872, directly limited civil liberties, sanctioned punishments and mass arrests without trial or legal support, and placed heavy restrictions on the free assembly of Pashtuns. With these regulations, violence and anti-British sentiment increased.

Abdul Ghaffar Khan

The founder of the movement, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan (1890–1988), was an active member of the Congress and a close ally to Gandhi.

His political activism became prominent with the founding of reform schools, not controlled by the Muslim clergy or British missionaries and promoting education in the Pashto language. These were also the first schools open to educating girls and accessible to the rural poor in the region. The brothers Abdul Ghaffar Khan and Dr. Khan Sahib belonged to a well-placed landowning family, and were active in the reform movements Anjuman-I-Islah-ul-Afghana (Society for Afghan Reform, founded 1921) and the Zalmu Jirga (Youth League, formed in 1929). Abdul Ghaffar Khan became a widely respected leader, not only for his reform activities, but because he refused privileges and wealth and chose to live a simple life dedicated to the service of his Pashtun community.

He established the KK with the professed aim of creating a united, independent, secular India, along with Pashtun autonomy. As its commander-in-chief, Khan traveled to the most inaccessible villages of the Pashtun-dominated districts, addressing large gatherings of supporters, greeting new recruits, visiting schools, and consulting with local *jirga* leaders. Profoundly influenced by the striking power of the Gandhian non-violent strategy of *satyagraha*, Ghaffar Khan, as a devout Muslim, grounded his principled non-violence in teachings of Islam, without however politicizing Islam. *Satyagraha* was a program of peaceful violation of specific laws, mass courting of arrests, occasional *hartals* (general shutdown or strike), and spectacular demonstrations or rallies. He was popularly addressed as *Badshah* (Urdu) or *Bacha* (Pashto) Khan, “King of Kings,” *Khan* also being a title for members of respected landowner families. He was an outspoken and fearless critic of British policies and later bitterly opposed the idea of the Partition of India and Pakistan. For his political actions and opinions, Khan spent more than 30 years of his life in prison, both during British rule as well as following independence. When Khan died on January 20, 1988 in Jalalabad in Afghanistan, a ceasefire was announced during the raging war, and the borders to India and Pakistan were declared open to allow for masses of supporters from all parts of the subcontinent to attend the funeral of a leader whose life had by then become steeped in myth. His radical dream of Pashtun autonomy and of a society that could defend itself purely by the strength of civilian effort remains one yet to be accomplished.

Military Organization and Structure

The KK aimed at independence from British domination and the reform of Pashtun society to establish a degree of political autonomy and self-rule. Whereas the Zalmu Jirga (Youth League) mainly consisted of the educated and landed elite, the KK accommodated the peasant and rural population in a voluntary action force, particularly in protest against the civil rights restrictions imposed through the Frontier Crimes Regulation Act. Further, the KK trained its members in community work and civil service.

The movement had a militant and a social wing, each with a different set-up and division of roles and tasks. The militant wing participated in visible protest actions, where the risk to personal safety was high and direct or indirect confrontation with armed forces was a threat, such as demonstrations, blockades, or as unarmed guards. The social wing concentrated on community or educational services and social work. The KK was hierarchically organized, using a combination of both the traditional model of the *jirga* with local village elders in commanding positions, as well as colonial military structures with posts such as that of lieutenant, colonel, general, or commander. Since most of the recruits of the army were from the grassroots, including peasants and landed or landless laborers, and mobility was restricted, there were committees and branches in every village and sub-district. The KK funded itself through voluntary contributions and donations of well-placed members and supporters. An economy based on solidarity and recognition of status also played an important role in creating the cohesion and collective engagement of the KK.

The thrust of the KK activities was in visible public disobedience and disregard of colonial laws. Foot soldiers traveled from village to village, persuading influential Pashtun landlords and local authorities to resign from government posts and not accept favors from British officers. They picketed and raided courts and other colonial institutions, calling for boycotts of British goods and non-cooperation with authorities. When challenged by armed policemen, KK soldiers sought arrest *en masse*. It was also common practice for KK activists to conduct flag marches through the same areas where British police forces conducted their patrols. They held mass public gatherings throughout the NWF

Province, with speeches, poetry readings, performances of patriotic Pashto plays, and community singing. They wore uniforms made of hand-spun cloth dyed in a reddish brown color from the local leather factory, which gave them the mostly derogative title of the *Surkh Posh* (Red Shirts). Women members wore black clothes. Visibility, not camouflage, was the key characteristic of the protest acts of the KK. The presence of KK guards in red uniforms enhanced their authority and credibility in the public sphere, particularly in areas of tension and social unrest, or at the arbitration of clan feuds.

Training in Non-Violence

Regular camps were run, attended by up to 1,000 KK soldiers from several villages, who gathered for several days at a stretch, undergoing disciplinary training by way of drilling and physical exercises, parades, and regional patrols. They received schooling on the anti-imperialist struggle and the political principles of non-violence. As a youth movement, the KK sought to demilitarize and disarm an area where it was considered necessary for every respectable male Pashtun to carry a rifle. Traditionally, Pashtuns served in one of the most prestigious British army regiments, known as the Corps of Guides. The Congress Committee Reports from the NWF region document the reintegration of several ex-army men as trainers in the camps of the KK. The quasi-conversion of combatants or ex-servicemen to the fold of non-violent civilian resistance was a part of the strategy of the peace force. Rather than disqualify persons with a background in the British military, their experiences and skills were integrated into the activities of the KK camps, which placed great emphasis on physical fitness and discipline.

The KK camps were publicity events in themselves, attracting crowds of onlookers, creating a spectacle out of the military-style camps. Ritualistic aspects of the military, such as conferring ranks and badges of honor, were adapted and transformed into Pashtun emblems of dignity. Yet the omission of the most obvious part of military training, namely the use of weapons, made the protest movement into a statement of pacifist defiance.

The work profile of a “Servant of God” also consisted of a reform program including religiously endorsed practices and obligations (*Islahi*),

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such as cooking for and feeding the poor. This program was extended to adopt Gandhian ideas of constructive non-violence, such as hand-spinning, weaving, prayer, and fasting, in addition to elements such as village sanitation drives, and maintenance and improvement of village infrastructure.

The *Pakhtun*, the monthly journal of the KK movement in the Pashto language, was repeatedly banned, stopped, and systematically destroyed by both the British and Pakistani rulers. No single library possesses the complete file of all issues of the journal from May 1928 to August 1947. Abdul Ghaffar Khan, his son, Ghani Khan, apart from other KK members, wrote regularly for the journal. The articles dealt with a vast array of topics, ranging from poetry to personal health and hygiene, village sanitation, educational reform, and current affairs. A search for Pashtun identity and sense of community, free from violence and oppression, marked the profile of the journal.

Servants, Servers, or Servicemen?

Importance was given to the notion of *khidmat*, or service to the community, to a cause greater than oneself, a concept with direct reference to Islamic tenets. The religious and cultural connotations of the notion of serving the community are crucial to understanding the acts of the non-violent army. The non-violent philosophy of the Pashtuns was not a matter of individual soul-searching and achievement, but an ideal and a principle for the entire community, stressing shared suffering and experience of discrimination, and hence requiring a collective effort. This is in clear contrast to the primarily individualistic approach that Gandhi adopted in his non-violent politics.

The use of the term *Khidmatgar* also describes a rewriting and punctuation of the colonial vocabulary. In government contracts or documents it was used to denote on the one hand lower-class, menial or domestic laborers, as well as civil servants, usually upper- or middle-class English-educated administrators. The term also referred to servicemen, implying army recruits. In calling the non-violent resisters by the same name as those who cooperated with the colonizers, the KK appropriated a social role, giving it a completely different meaning and relevance.

The concept of the servant or the server being devoted to a larger cause of the community is common to both the military and a religious group. Like the military, KK servicemen were required voluntarily to subordinate themselves and obey orders without question; however, being a voluntary association, they were theoretically allowed to leave without punishment. The social and peer pressure to stay in the movement was, however, extremely high, in spite of the repressive persecution by the British. Non-violent resistance was a high-risk commitment. The line between consent and coercion in maintaining membership of the army was arguably thin. Even if there were no authorities to persecute someone for desertion from service to the resistance force, families and the larger community placed immense pressure to maintain the momentum of KK agitations. This aspect is more akin to the mechanisms of a religious community, where sanctions are often indirect and subtle.

Transforming a Culture of Violence

Every recruit to the KK took an oath to become a Servant of God, to refrain from touching weapons, from taking revenge, or engaging in clan-based feuds by becoming a servant of humanity. Further, the oath committed every member to a certain number of hours of community work on a daily basis, as well as to a frugal lifestyle, sacrificing wealth and comfort for the service of the community. The oath was taken with hands placed on the *Quran* but without any reference to religious identity. There was in fact not even any mention of national independence. The oath sought to establish a new sense of Pashtun identity, using and deriving legitimacy from existing elements of Pashtunwali (Pashtun culture). Interestingly, an idea such as *nang* (integrity), which previously justified revenge and bloodshed, was reframed as a non-violent principle. So the very same culture that upheld the image of an armed Pashtun warrior was able to generate the role model of an unarmed Pashtun soldier and citizen. The pacifist praxis of the KK was not characterized by a total rejection of anything related to violent institutions. Rather, the critique of the military was performed through a reconstitution of what it meant to be a fighter, or to sign up for combat.

An Islamic Understanding of Non-Violence

A common question asked of Abdul Ghaffar Khan was how far the idea of non-violence was coherent with or derivable from Islam. When Khan used the term in his speeches, he usually meant Gandhian *ahimsa* (non-injury). However, the term used more frequently is *sabr* (patience, endurance, or self-restraint). This religiously connoted term refers to patient, individual suffering of hardships without complaint, or enduring false accusations and trouble caused by others, and steadfastness in pursuing an Islamic way of life and mission. The way in which Khan used the notion of *sabr* is probably conceptually the closest to non-violence. Adapted as a proactive idea, the concept is not just limited to non-injury of others, while it includes the idea of self-restraint and control of aggression. This also suggests a new or better form of masculinity, whereas traditionally, patience as in forbearance is a feminine attribute. Most significantly, *sabr*, as opposed to the notion of passive toleration of injustice and unwarranted suffering, is directly interpreted as a weapon, as sanctioned by Islam, and as the instrument fit to use against the weapons of the colonial power. Self-restraint and self-control in the face of aggression are also interestingly written into the discourse of trained bodily discipline, which then draws the link to military training. For a people historically marked as primitive, excessive, and uncontrollably violent, the show of discipline and control itself is a way of protesting against the stereotypes and quasi-rationalizations of repressions against them. While seeking recognition for non-violence as a method of combat, this organization involved itself in the process of religious and cultural legitimization to negotiate a new interpretation of Pashtun identity, of what it meant to “do Pashto.” In doing so, it asserted that non-violence was rooted both in Pashtun and Islamic tradition.

The model of non-violent action practiced in the army of the KK was notably different from Gandhian non-violence, often perceived as its inspiring model. While Abdul Ghaffar Khan may indeed have admired and respected Gandhi as an individual and professed affiliation to his political goals, his interpretation of non-violence within the Pashtun social set-up was closely connected to Islamic principles of service to humanity and of forbearance, as well as to

uniquely Pashtun concepts of integrity, citizenship, and social cohesion.

Local Before the National

While Islamic principles strongly influenced not only the leadership of the KK but also the kind of activities that it pursued, it was not an organization dedicated to promoting political Islam. Despite referring to themselves as the Servants of God and unhesitatingly locating their working principles in an Islamic code of social conduct and engagement, the KK did not strive to unite all Muslims. It emphasized faith-based social commitment in equal measure to resisting political oppression. In spite of its entire nationalist, anti-imperialist ethos, the KK was meant to be a local organization, aiming at the complete self-sufficiency and autonomy of the Pashtun community, which included creating a sense of solidarity and dignity, as well as economic and administrative independence.

The organization was impervious to the idea of Muslims as a separate political community and never saw Pashtunistan (the Land of the Pashtuns) as a Muslim land. This gave the KK and particularly its leadership the reputation of being a pro-Hindu lackey among Pakistani nationalists. It also saw the organization in an uncomfortable position with the Congress Party during late 1946 and 1947, when the idea of Partition had gained popularity and many Congress leaders supported the move, while Abdul Ghaffar Khan bitterly opposed the Partition and the formation of a Pakistani state. The KK became unpopular with the Muslim League and the proponents of the two-nation theory supporting the Partition of India and Pakistan. Yet Khan refused to leave his Pashtun homeland and migrate to India after Partition and opted for Pakistani citizenship.

The KK and Indian Freedom Struggle

The relationship between the KK and the all-India freedom struggle was complex. For the British, the NWF Province was a vital area, on one hand due to its role as the frontier, with Soviet Russia just beyond Afghanistan, and on the other hand because the Pashtuns were a major component of their military recruitment. They therefore tried their best to smash the movement. To do this, in 1930, during the civil disobedience

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movement, they brought in upper-caste Hindu *Garhwali* troops, who however refused to fire on the unarmed *Khidmatgars*. From 1932 the involvement of women in the movement also posed a problem for the British, as many Indian officers were reluctant to use violence on women. The British, however, were undeterred, and bombed a village, as well as arresting thousands of KK activists. Close connections developed between the Congress and the KK from the civil disobedience period. Ghaffar Khan's brother Dr. Khan Saheb led the Congress to victory in the 1937 elections. In 1939 his government was one of several Congress governments that resigned. In the NWF Province this had the effect of strengthening the hands of opponents of the KK. They were aided by the British, who shifted from repression to communal propaganda, arguing that collaboration with Hindus would mean blows against the traditional Muslim and tribal culture of the region. These problems were compounded by a factional conflict inside the KK, when Ghaffar Khan wanted his son to be the leader of Pakhtun Zalemy, the youth organization affiliated to the KK, though Salar Aslam Khan had been elected. Collectively, these factors meant a relative strengthening of their opponents. However, despite this, the KK had considerable strength. In the immediate pre-Partition period, Khan wanted the option of voting for a separate Pathan state, and when this was not given, called for a boycott. Only a minority took part in the plebiscite that decided that the NWF Province would go to Pakistan. This made Khan and the KK permanently suspicious in the eyes of the Pakistan government, which eventually smashed the movement by persecution as well as support to its opponents.

SEE ALSO: Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand (1869–1948); India, Civil Disobedience Movement and Demand for Independence; Jinnah, Muhammad Ali (1876–1948); Non-Violent Movements: Struggles for Rights, Justice, and Identities

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