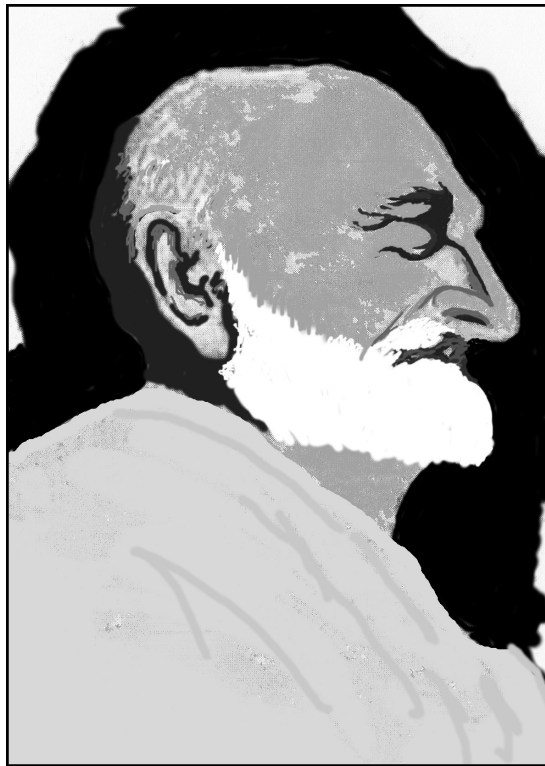


ABDUL GHAFFAR KHAN

A ROLE MODEL FOR PEACE



THE BACKGROUND

Colonial domination

Over several hundreds of years, the great powers of Europe (Great Britain, Spain, France, the Netherlands, Portugal) took power all over the world. This was the era of colonies. It culminated in the 19th century. By the middle of the 20th century it was over. In one way, the era of colonialism was the first step to globalization. It brought the world together in a new way. But it was aggressive and unfair and brought much humiliation and suffering to peoples in Africa, Asia and America.

A different kind of domination

All through history, strong peoples and nations have attacked and ruled over smaller and weaker peoples. There is, however, a special relationship between the Muslim and the Christian civilizations. Islam conquered huge territories that were previously ruled by Christians. At least twice, Muslim armies threatened the whole of Europe. Then, the Islamic civilization declined, and the modern West became strong. At the time of colonization, many previously powerful Muslim nations, such as Egypt, Syria and Iraq had to accept humiliation at the hands of Western powers. This was extremely painful for many Muslims.

In 1924, the last Caliph was dethroned by Western powers. A movement for the reestablishment of the Caliphate and more political power to Islam started within the Muslim populations. This movement is still active and has had many off-shoots, some peaceful and some violent.

Islam in India

In India, Islam had begun to spread quite early. Eventually, Muslims coming in from Central Asia conquered almost the whole of India. They were called the Moguls (from “Mongolian”). After a few hundred years, the Mogul rulers had to cede power to the British. The Moguls had mostly been

tolerant of the Hindu majority, but there had also been discrimination and persecution. The distrust between Muslims and Hindus was deep. The British sometimes used it to consolidate their own power.

Different trends

When the movement for independence started, Muslims and Hindus worked together for a free India. This was what Gandhi and Abdul Ghaffar Khan wanted. But many Muslims dreamt of restoration of the Caliphate. They could not imagine sharing the political power with non-Muslims. Others were afraid that the Hindus, once they were in power, would take revenge on the Muslims for all they had suffered during the centuries of Muslim rule. Because of this and the humiliation at the hands of Western powers (that the Muslims called “Christian”, even though many Westerners were not Christians at all), there was a growing feeling that Muslims needed a nation of their own.

This idea was eventually promoted by the Muslim League, in spite of Gandhi’s efforts to keep India united. Referendums were held in Muslim majority areas of India. East Bengal voted in favour of creating a “homeland” for Muslims. Pakistan was then created in the midst of horrible riots and much violence.

At the same time, a stricter interpretation of Islam became more widespread. In India, Islam had traditionally been of a more inclusive and mystical kind. The new “Muslim homeland” quickly provided a fertile ground for identity-based religion. The open, spiritual interpretation of Islam that Abdul Ghaffar Khan himself had always professed eventually fell totally out of favour in Pakistan. It was rejected by all who felt a need to reaffirm their identity only as Muslims, not as Muslims of the Subcontinent.

THE STORY

First years and commitment to teaching

Abdul Ghaffar Khan was born 1890 in the Mohamadzai clan of the village of Utmanzai in Peshawar district. When Abdul Ghaffar was five or six years old, he started his religious education at a mosque and later studied in a missionary school. Eventually, he joined the army, but when he saw an English officer insulting an Indian senior in age he renounced his military career.

In the year 1912 Abdul Ghaffar Khan embarked upon his work as an educationist, under the influence of Haji Abdul Wahid Sahib. They opened schools all over Peshawar and Mardan districts. This work made them popular among the people. But Ghaffar Khan had also reflected on the deeper sense of the schools.

The violent culture of the Pathans

Pathans were stuck in a cycle of internal feuds that culminated in revenge killings. The British Empire had been having a series of wars with the Northwest Province. They were successful in The First Afghan War of 1838, but in 1842 the Pathans sought revenge, massacring a British force of 4,500. These violent acts produced fear and hatred among the Pathans and the British people respectively, each believing their own violence was justified because of the barbaric acts of the “other.” Ghaffar Khan knew that this cycle of violence had to change. He knew that the Pathan culture of violence was self-destructive. Ghaffar Khan was deeply troubled by this tradition within his own people. How could the culture of violence be stopped?

There was a better way than violence, and Khan found it in his faith. According to him, *‘Islam is amal, yakeen, muhabat (work, faith, and love) and without these the name ‘Muslim’ is sounding brass and tinkling cymbal.’* His interpretation of the Qur’an led him to live a life of love and nonviolence. This is where his commitment to schools came from. Education was only available to rich young men. His and Haji’s schools were for the poor and

for girls. Yet he knew that education wasn't enough to change the violent traditions of the Pathans.

End of the educational project

Fearing the influence of the Haji, the authorities eventually thought of separating the two pioneers. Haji understood and escaped into tribal territory. The Government, then, arrested most of the teachers of the schools.

After this, at the request of his father, Ghaffar Khan settled down and married. Soon after the birth of his second son, however, Ghaffar Khan's wife died. Ghaffar Khan left the two children in the care of his mother and got deeply involved in work and service of his people once again.

The beginning of the non-cooperation movement

In 1919 the Rowlatt Bills gave the British authorities power to suppress "revolutionary activities". Mahatma Gandhi called a nation-wide hartal on 6 April. The massacre of innocent civilians at Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar took place on 13 April. Later, Martial law was declared in Punjab. In the upheaval, Abdul Ghaffar Khan was arrested and sent to prison.

After his release from the jail Ghaffar Khan married again. In 1920 he attended the Congress session at Nagpur and was attracted to Gandhi and his programme. Coming back from Nagpur, Abdul Ghaffar Khan began to restart the closed schools. He was arrested again. During this imprisonment he read the Gita for the first time and also the Granth Saheb and the Bible.

Ghaffar Khan was released in 1924. He went to the Hajj and during the journey his second wife died. Ghaffar Khan then declared that he would not marry anymore, but spend his life serving the people. In the same year Gandhi went on fast for communal amity. Ghaffar Khan volunteered to preach Hindu-Muslim unity.

The Khudai Khidmatgar

In May 1928, Khan began to make speeches to his people about nonviolence. He recruited his students, who in turn recruited others. Many Pathans dropped their weapons and lived a life of nonviolence against British occupation. One of the key points Khan made was about the nature of God: Allah is All-Merciful, All-Loving, and All-Compassionate. He formed a nonviolent army called *Khudai Khidmatgars*, “Servants of God.” They refused to retaliate, signing a contract in which they stated:

I am a Khudai Khidmatgar; and as God needs no service, but serving his creation is serving him, I promise to serve humanity in the name of God.

I promise to refrain from violence and from taking revenge. I promise to forgive those who oppress me or treat me with cruelty.

I promise to refrain from taking part in feuds and quarrels and from creating enmity.

I promise to treat every Pathan as my brother and friend.

I promise to refrain from antisocial customs and practices.

I promise to live a simple life, to practice virtue and refrain from evil.

I promise to practice good manners and good behavior and not to lead a life of idleness. I promise to devote at least two hours a day to social work.

Their understanding of God as loving, merciful, and compassionate made them forgive everyone, including their enemies. There was no need for the British oppressors to admit they were wrong and in need of forgiveness, because they were already forgiven. Pathan nonviolent resistance would allow the British to see their own violence and the suffering it caused for what it really was: absurd and inhumane.

In April 1930, Abdul Ghaffar Khan was arrested for organising the Civil Disobedience movement. After that, an extremely brutal repression was let loose in the land of the Khudai Khidmatgar. The British were much more savage in the North West Frontier Provinces than anywhere else in India. The Khudai Khidmatgar showed great restraint and courage in not fighting back.

Together with Gandhi

In October 1934, when Ghaffar Khan went to Calcutta, the students of Bengal welcomed him in the midst of J C Sengupta, Satish Chandra Dasgupta, Prof. Abdur Rehman and others. Addressing the gathering he requested not to call him “Frontier Gandhi”. He said, “Mahatma Gandhi is our general and there should be one general only. So do not add the name of Gandhi to my name. I am not fit for the praise you have showered on me.”

Those years were the period of exile from his home province. Ghaffar Khan felt perfectly at home with Mahatma Gandhi and took active part in the Ashram activities. Ghaffar Khan's 12-year-old son Abdul Ali and his 14 year old daughter Mehartaj stayed with their father or, when he was absent, under the care of Mahatma Gandhi.

Partition of India; prison and neglect

Abdul Ghaffar deeply regretted the partition. He and his *Khudai Khidmatgars* had chosen Congress. But now it seemed as if they would no more belong to India. Nor would they have any place in Pakistan, because of their differences with the Muslim League. “We shall be outcasts in the eyes of both”, he remarked.

Following the referendum which led to the creation of Pakistan, Abdul Ghaffar Khan was imprisoned in the new state. Eventually, he had to spend 15 years of his life in the prisons of Pakistan. He was also maligned as a stooge of Hindus. Pakistan had chosen the path of confrontation and religious bigotry. The non-violent army of Pashtuns, the *Khudai Kitmatgars*, was dissolved. All the work of Abdul Ghaffar Khan was destroyed. He himself was ignored and his name was excluded from the official history of the nation. He died in 1988.

The late C F Andrews described Ghaffar Khan as “*a king among men by stature and dignity of bearing*”. He was calm and resolute, truthful and clean, sincere and upright. Like all true reformers he was against slavery, including the subjugation of women. On 15 December 1941, speaking at a gathering of women at Togh in the Kohat district he said: “*Let me assure you that when*

Peace Role Models: Abdul Ghaffar Khan

freedom has been won, you will have an equal share and place with your brothers in this country.”



SOME WORDS OF ABDUL GHAFFAR KHAN

For today's children and the world, my thoughts are that only if they accept nonviolence can they escape destruction, with all this talk of the atom bomb, and live a life of peace. If this doesn't happen, then the world will be in ruins. (1985)

*

There is nothing surprising in a Muslim or a Pathan like me subscribing to the creed of nonviolence. It is not a new creed. It was followed 1,400 years ago by the Prophet all the time when he was in Mecca.

*

As a young boy, I had had violent tendencies; the hot blood of the Pathans was in my veins. But in jail I had nothing to do except read the Qur'an. I read about the Prophet Muhammad in Mecca, about his patience, his suffering, his dedication. I had read it all before, as a child, but now I read it in the light of what I was hearing all around me about Gandhiji's struggle against the British Raj.

*

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 are indifferent to the welfare of their fellowmen, whose hearts are empty of love, they do not know the meaning of religion.

*

The Holy Prophet Mohammed came into this world and taught us 'That man is a Muslim who never hurts anyone by word or deed, but who works for the benefit and happiness of God's creatures.' Belief in God is to love one's fellow men.

*

Only a dead nation remembers its heroes when they die. Real nations respect them when they are alive.



*

(Khan once told Gandhi of a discussion he had with a Punjabi Muslim who didn't see the nonviolent core of Islam.) I cited chapter and verse from the Koran to show the great emphasis that Islam had laid on peace, which is its corner stone. I also showed to him how the greatest figures in Islamic history were known more for their forbearance and self-restraint than for their fierceness. The reply rendered him speechless.

THE VISION OF ABDUL GHAFFAR KHAN

Abdul Ghaffar Khan was first of all a Muslim Pathan. He wanted to reform and perhaps transform his own people, the Pathans. To him, the two great evils of his people were ignorance and violence. The Pathans were known by all as brave, honest and strong. But if this strength and courage was allied to ignorance and violence, nothing good could come out of it. Therefore, his first efforts went into education. He built schools and provided education not only for the rich, but for all: poor people and girls, who had never had a chance to go to school.

Ghaffar Khan then turned his attention to the problem of violence. His idea was that the military tradition and fighting ethos of the Pathans could be put to use for peaceful purposes. As he himself knew, and as Gandhi often said, non-violence is the weapon of the strong. If, then, the Pathans, with their reputation for courage, would choose this weapon, great victories could be won. Ghaffar Khan always said that he got his inspiration from Islam and the tradition of the Prophet.

Still, his vision was not exclusive of others. Indeed, for him a true Muslim would respect and protect people of other faiths, always seeking the common good. This inclusive and open interpretation of Islam also made him want to give women just as much space in society as he gave men.

Ghaffar Khan was a practical man who didn't write much theory. On the one hand, he identified the weaknesses of his people and on the other hand he could see their strength and how it could be used in a dynamic, peaceful and creative way. This is what he tried all his life.

Even though Ghaffar Khan was primarily a nationalist and a Muslim, his vision was universal: the transformation of the human being through trust in God, total honesty and endless respect for other human beings, of whatever religion or race. For him, to be a Muslim was that.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ABDUL GHAFFAR KHAN TODAY

Abdul Ghaffar Khan is important for the people of Bangladesh for several reasons. One is that he belongs to the recent history of the Subcontinent, which gave rise to East Pakistan and eventually to Bangladesh. Another is that he was a Muslim who sought inspiration in the Scriptures and traditions of Islam for a non-violent, political and social transformation of the society. Yet another reason is that his response to the oppression and violence of the British has a significance that goes beyond his time and country.

The problems we have

Nobody can deny that Bangladesh today is facing a number of urgent problems. Some are physical (overpopulation, depletion of soil, climate change etc.), but some depend entirely on us. The political violence, corruption, injustice and discrimination that are rampant in this country could be stopped if we wanted to. This is not the work of the climate or of nature. Bangladeshi society is very aggressive and hard. What is the reason? In the time of Abdul Ghaffar Khan, it was easier to find an answer to that question. One could point a finger at the British rulers and say: “all this is because of them.” Of course, Ghaffar Khan, Gandhi and the other great leaders knew that it wasn’t as simple as that. But it was still clear that any change would have to come through the removal of the British. In Bangladesh today, Bengalis are oppressed by Bengalis. There are also ethnic minorities, but they are very small. Even if there is an important Hindu minority community in the country and some Buddhists and Christians, in Bangladesh, ninety percent of the violence, discrimination and injustice is done by Muslim Bengalis against Muslim Bengalis.

The similarity to Khan’s situation; his response

This is exactly the situation that Abdul Ghaffar Khan faced during the first period of his active life, when he tried to reform the Pathan society. The Pathans are no doubt very different from the Bengalis. But the problem of poverty, ignorance and violence is similar. They were Muslims, and they live in the Indian subcontinent. What did Abdul Ghaffar Khan do in this

situation? Though his action was almost entirely practical and not theoretical, one could summarize his attitude in a few key words: trust, honesty, courage, discipline. This is what he wanted instead of suspicion, lies, cowardice and lawlessness. Let's look at the words in the light of Khan's example and the present situation of Bangladesh.

Trust

For Ghaffar Khan, trust was first of all trust in God. This trust was so strong it needed no extra support. God is all mercy, all forgiveness. God is justice. Ghaffar Khan interpreted the Islamic tradition and the Koran in the light of this, and also tried to give expression to it in his own life. But because he trusted God, who is the source of all being, he also trusted people. Not only Gandhi and the *Khudai Khidmatgars*, but also the British, his enemies. Unless you believe that there is something good in your enemy, you cannot win him over. It becomes impossible to believe in his transformation. But Ghaffar Khan believed that when he was doing the work of peace and reconciliation, he was in fact doing the work of God. And then it could not fail to create a response in others. To what extent do we rely on violence, muscle power and manipulation in Bangladesh today and how much do we actually believe that what we are doing is good? To what extent are we ready to believe that our opponents can understand what is good? Will the change we struggle for be beneficent to all? Is there anything that our opponents have in common with us that can be appealed to? This brings us to the next word on the list.

Honesty

The promise is very strong in the Pathan culture. Words really mean something. When the *Khudai Khidmatgar* were mercilessly beaten by the British, tortured and killed, they still didn't fight back, because they had given their word. Such honesty makes real commitment possible. With real commitment, real change is possible. Such honesty is intensely practical. Yet it also has an intellectual side to it. Ghaffar Khan wanted his fellow Pathans to make a balanced judgment on their culture of violence. He wanted them to think coolly about the advantages and disadvantages of revenge killings and clan fighting. Is it possible to make such a judgment today in

Bangladesh? Where are all our hartals leading us? What effect does the tremendous level of corruption have on society? If I commit myself to a different kind of life with no violence and no corruption, what effect will that have on my life? This brings us to the third of the basic words of Khan.

Courage

What the commitment to truth and nonviolence brought to the Pathans of the *Khudai Khidmatgars* was great suffering at the hands of their oppressors. They lost almost everything. This is exactly what happens in a war. When soldiers go forward to kill or be killed, we call it courage. But is there any greater courage than to meet a violent enemy unarmed? In order to do that, I really have to believe what I am fighting for. Unfortunately, this courage has, in Bangladesh, been replaced by muscle power. One example is the hartal. It was first invented by Mahatma Gandhi to show the strength of civil non-cooperation. Only those who believed Gandhi's message was right would participate. If many participated, it became a very powerful sign of the unity of the people.

Today, hartal is an instrument of terror. It has become a sign of the deep disunity and animosity of the people. Today, it would demand real courage to oppose a hartal in the name of truth. The risks that Ghaffar Khan and the *Khudai Khidmatgar* took were similar, even greater. Many died, others were persecuted and imprisoned. But they showed courage, because they had something that was worth suffering for. This, however, is only possible if the last word on our list becomes reality.

Discipline

Ghaffar Khan organized his *Khudai Khidmatgar* like an army. They had training camps. They had officers and generals. There was great discipline. In general, the Indian movement of non-cooperation and ahimsa was extremely disciplined. As soon as violence started, or things got out of control, the leaders would cancel their movement and wait until the passion had died down. In order to reach a goal, unity is necessary. We have to discipline our minds and our feelings. We must keep our reactions and

natural tendencies under control. To struggle for peaceful, positive change demands enormous inner and outer discipline.

Khan's example is enough

If Abdul Ghaffar Khan were born as a Bengali Muslim today, he would probably first stress our need for unity and tolerance. He would appeal to Muslims to look for inspiration for peace and justice in the Koran. He would try to use the special strength of the Bengali people in advancing the cause of justice and equality in society. Just as he used the martial tradition of the Pathans to form a non-violent army, he would perhaps use the creativity and competitiveness of the Bengalis to find ever new ways of dealing with the problems that greed and passions create. He would call for openness towards minorities in the country and towards other religious traditions in the world. He would stress the benefits of formal education and support the efforts to give to women a space in society equal to that of men.

But why do we need to wait for a new Abdul Ghaffar Khan to be born in this country? We already have his example.

YOU CAN DO IT YOURSELF

Why not follow the example of Abdul Ghaffar Khan? You can do it. You don't necessarily need to be a Muslim, but if you are, then try to discover how Ghaffar Khan could justify his nonviolence and openness to others by his faith. In case you are not a Muslim, see if Khan was right in claiming that "every religion that has come into the world has brought the message of love and brotherhood". Do you find it in your own faith? Start practicing what you find.

Get good habits

In order to do this, you need to cultivate the four virtues that Abdul Ghaffar Khan showed in his life and work: trust, honesty, courage and discipline. You can acquire them simply by practicing them in your everyday life. If you want to reform society, you must begin with yourself. Refuse all forms of lies and dishonesty. Refuse to lie to yourself. Test your courage by standing up for your opinions and beliefs even when they are not popular. Test your opinions and beliefs by asking yourself difficult questions. This is already a great challenge. You will see that it changes a great deal in your life and relations. You will become a passive peacemaker, a source of stability and trust.

Become active

The next step is to become active. Look for injustice around you. We are all faced with some kind of injustice, some kind of violence. It can be in your family, in your hostel, in your village. Ask yourself what its root is. Pray and reflect about the way to change this situation of injustice in order to bring Peace to those who suffer and to those who cause suffering. This is what Ghaffar Khan believed Islam is about: to bring the peace of God to the human family. Jesus, Buddha and the Gita are giving similar messages. When you think you have understood the situation, make a commitment. In the beginning it doesn't need to be very great. Just ask yourself: "What can I do?" Then start doing it. Don't make a big fuss, but act with determination.

You will find that others will join you. Remember that not everyone is called to become a great hero. Not everyone will have a great success. Yet everyone can make a step forward, then another, then another. Don't stop. Don't be satisfied with doing only little. Always try to do a little more. This will take you to the level which is yours.

Look for unexpected solutions

Be creative. Abdul Ghaffar Khan saw that his people were warriors. This was at the core of the problem with the Pathans. Yet Khan never tried to change this, but he wanted the Pathans to become warriors for peace. Think creatively about the present problems of the people in this country. What is the specific mindset or tradition or ability that fuels this problem? Can it be used in a different way, so that it becomes constructive instead of destructive? Can it be used to create order instead of generating chaos?

Look for inspiration

If you only look at the bad things, the things that don't work, the faults and the weaknesses of people, you will become depressed and unable to continue. There are many good people in Bangladesh and much good work going on here and elsewhere in the world. Try to see what is good. Try to get in touch with good people. Listen to those who have experience. Learn from their mistakes. Learn from their courage.

You can still live your life

Abdul Ghaffar Khan, Gandhi and other great leaders gave their lives for peace. Others had families and ordinary lives, but still did much for the transformation of society. There is a role for everyone: the housewife, the student, the married couple, the employee of a bank, the monk... Find your place. Wherever you are, make sure that you are a part of the solution, not a part of the problem.