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**The Mischaracterization of the Pakhtun-Islamic Peace Culture  
Created by Abdul Ghaffar Khan and the Khudai Khidmatgars<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

*Abdul Ghaffar Khan and his Khudai Khidmatgar Movement, whose peace activities included nonviolent resistance to British rule in India, have remained relatively unknown despite the magnitude of their achievement and significance (100,000 strong peace army). Even among appreciative peace scholars their nonviolence has been mischaracterized as an adoption of Gandhi's teachings; Khan is referred to as the Muslim Gandhi. I argue that this is due to a reliance on biased colonial sources, concomitant racist characterization of the Pakhtuns and Islam, and an insufficient understanding of violence. I illustrate how this movement's motivation and inspiration were deeply rooted in Pakhtun culture and Islam, even though Khan and Gandhi were spiritually alike, with the same peace cultural commitments, working together for independence. A better understanding of this movement's origins as indigenous is crucial to avoid the vilification of these people that continues to justify violence against them, constraining them to respond likewise.*

**Introduction**

While Ghaffar Khan is not anywhere as well-known as his beloved ally Mahatma Gandhi, much has been written about his nonviolent resistance to British rule. He worked side by side with Gandhi, considering the older man a mentor when it came to organizing against the British through the Indian National Congress. His own statements about how Gandhi changed his life have been misunderstood to mean that Gandhi turned him from violence to nonviolence (Rowell, 2009). This has led to him being referred to as "Frontier" or "Muslim" Gandhi, often described as if he was a disciple who adopted Gandhi's teachings of nonviolence (Shah, 2015). Such a characterization distorts our understanding of violence and nonviolence and prevents a genuine appreciation of Ghaffar Khan and the Khudai Khidmatgars, as well as the Pakhtun/Islamic spirituality, values and broader culture that gave rise to them. Other scholars have analyzed and discussed some of these misconceptions even within peace studies (Arbab, 2017; Bala, 2013; Mahmoud Hanifi, 2016). Among the reasons for the near amnesia about this very significant movement, as Safoora Arbab (2019) observes, is the epistemology, heavily reliant on colonial representations, that has portrayed Pakhtuns as violent and barbaric, due to their tribal culture and Islam. Such a depiction of the Pakhtuns, has contributed not only to the misrepresentation of the Khudai Khidmatgar movement as just a branch, an imitation of the Gandhi movement, but also to its characterization, as Sruti Bala (2013) observes, as an aberrant phase of nonviolence in an otherwise violent culture. As such, it would not be as noteworthy. In addition to this reason, I shall discuss below, further political reasons for their relegation to being nothing but an interlude in Pashtun history; it is hard to talk about Khan etc, without addressing the processes by which they were sent almost to obscurity. Since not many will be familiar with this movement, culture, and some of the historical context, I briefly outline it. Utilizing sociological and subaltern theoretical insights I analyze some ways of interpreting colonial accounts, (applicable to current ones as well, in this case, characterizations of violence vs nonviolence), and show that contrary to dominant narratives, Abdul Ghaffar Khan and his fellow Khudai Khidmatgars (Servants of God) engaged in a *jihad* (struggle or effort) to create a culture of peace among the Pakhtun people, drawing on indigenous Pakhtun and Islamic

resources (something noted by Gandhi). Had it not been such, it would never have succeeded to the extent that it did (Shah, 2007), as we shall see later.

### **A People and A Movement Misunderstood**

Outsiders have presented an entirely false picture of us to the world, and it is with deep grief and sadness in my heart that I have to say this....Their love of freedom and liberty is described as disregard for law and order, their bravery and courage is called savagery...selfish governments use it as an excuse to crush the Pathans, to blow them up with bombs, to mow them down with machine-guns, to destroy their hearths and homes...mankind has tyrannised and outraged them..." (Ghaffar Khan, 1969, pp. 123-124)

...dominant colonial narratives about Pashtuns and imperial projects in Afghanistan that have been ethnicized to such an extent as to border on racism...It is odd to hear and read how much international love there is for Afghanistan given that conditions on the ground resemble an endless prison for local populations who beyond the growing ordinariness of military occupation are subject to panoptical surveillance blimps, drones, night vision devices, and bio-tracking technologies to monitor and control them. (Mahmoud Hanifi, 2016, p. 398)

The first quote is from Abdul Ghaffar Khan, talking about events occurring a century ago, and the second is from a scholar about current events affecting the same people, the Pakhtuns.<sup>2</sup> The implications of how we understand and represent violence and nonviolence, and how seriously we take history and context in our appreciation of our peace heroes is critical. The two quotes above illustrate how characterizations of cultures and people as violent or nonviolent can have lethal consequences; the very thing we in peace studies seek to avoid. Peace scholars and admirers of the movement often operate within the same set of stereotypical assumptions regarding Islam and the Pakhtuns that we decry in their oppressors--the British authorities, the Muslim League and certain Pakistani authorities. These are the people who gave rise to one of the most powerful, deeply nonviolent movements committed to creating a culture of peace under the leadership of Abdul Ghaffar Khan.

Even many local scholars, reliant on the writings of colonial officers, repeat their versions of conversations and events without any critical interpretation or contextualization. For instance, in one such work on the Khudai Khidmatgar Movement (KKM), although sympathetic to the Pakhtun struggle against the British, Karim Khan (1997) seeks to point out what a feat it was that the Khudai Khidmatgars (KKs) and Khan transformed the inherently violent Pakhtuns. Pointing out that "To be a 'Pukhtun' means to be violent" (p. 276), the author cites a British officer's account of a conversation he alleges to have had with a local Pakhtun religious leader who had killed an elderly man (according to the officer), asking why he was not making an attempt to stop the age old cycle of killing. He says the man replied, "You British might--indeed you would--have the moral strength to stand alone for what you believe to be right, but we (the Pukhtuns) are slaves of our Code (of *Pukhtunwali*) and remain bound by it" (Emerson, 1941, quoted in Karim Khan, 1997, p. 277). This is one among numerous such accounts, as we shall see in the following section on the historical and geographical context.

### **Historical Context, British Suppression and Characterization of Pakhtuns**

The territory where the Pashtun people live straddles parts of what are now Pakistan and Afghanistan, especially the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region known as the North West Frontier Province until 2010, which had been part of the British Raj in India during the colonial period (the name indicates the geographical location relative to British India). It is impossible to

appreciate the significance and nature of this movement, and the reasons for the persistent misunderstandings about it and the people of the region, without understanding the geographical aspects of the region, the rugged and treacherous nature of some parts of the terrain, and the location of the Khyber Pass within it. The latter is considered the only passageway that is not too cumbersome to traverse, between what was then India (now Pakistan) and Afghanistan, much of central Asia, Iran and so on (Banerjee, 2000). This was how the Greeks and many others throughout history entered the region. The Pakhtuns were constantly having to defend themselves from invaders (Banerjee, 2000; Shar, 2015).<sup>3</sup> Most importantly, the British considered this region a crucial frontier buffer zone between India, which was their most valuable possession, and Russia.

Having conquered most parts of India in the nineteenth century, the British moved northward, consolidating their power over the region that is now Pakistan. In the process, they engaged in Anglo-Afghan wars to ensure their control, in what was known as the “Great Game” (between Britain and Russia), introducing the problematic Durand Line in 1893, dividing Afghanistan from British India (Banerjee, 2000; Saikal, 2010). The Durand Line literally ran through the middle of Pakhtun tribal lands, separating them between two countries. As Amin Saikal (2010) notes, it had the effect of “...seriously undermining their potential for unity and prospects for an independent territory of Pashtunistan...it sowed the seeds of an enduring border dispute between Afghanistan and Pakistan...” (p. 7). This whole endeavour into these tribal areas was known as the Forward Policy, which was quite brutal. As noted above, the Pashtuns were no strangers to having to defend their land, and as such, they fought back. Despite facing defeats at times, they tended to revolt to reclaim their freedom and land. I relate accounts of one such revolt to illustrate the nature of the exchanges between the Pakhtuns and the British, and some of the ways in which each party is characterized by British accounts.

During one such onslaught by the British in 1897 the tribesmen were inspired by a religious leader, Mullah Mastun (referred to by Winston Churchill as the mad fakir), who claimed to have divine guidance and support in calling for the uprising (Easwaran, 1984). I discuss a couple of descriptions about the events surrounding this invasion and the tribesmen’s response as it illustrates the type of narrative that has influenced how these people have been characterized. The first is from the young Winston Churchill who had arrived in the region to report on this frontier war. Because of the awareness of the military prowess of the tribesmen, this Forward Policy of invading their territory and subduing them was not uncontroversial among the British (Toye, 2011). Speaking of their tendency to fight and kill, Churchill (1898) notes: “Such a disposition, combined with an absolute lack of reverence for all forms of law, and authority, and a complete assurance of equality, is the cause of their frequent quarrels with the British power” (p. 7). He also points out “Seizing all weapons, they become Ghazis—as dangerous and as sensible as mad dogs: fit only to be treated as such” (p. 40). Discussing how the Muslims in various countries, such as Sudan have tried to repel the British, he states,

In each case civilisation is confronted with militant Mahommedanism. The forces of progress clash with those of reaction. The religion of blood and war is face to face with that of peace. Luckily the religion of peace is usually better armed. (p. 41)

The second account is from Woosnam Mills (1897), a British war correspondent who speaks of peaceful submission after an earlier British expedition (he casually mentions numerous “punitive” expeditions), and how the tribesmen had learned that it was unwise to oppose the

British. He marvels at the wonderful adaptability of disposition of these border tribes who return to their fields and daily business as if nothing had happened. He muses that this may be because the British rule had been substituted for the anarchical state of things, giving security to the country. Of course, if this was true, they would not have kept resorting to revolts after brief periods of “pacification.” Like Churchill, he goes on at length about how fanatical the tribesmen are and how the love of fight is second nature to them, and how “...British might had been exhibited with such prodigality to our enemies...” (p. 6). He too refers to the mad fakir saying “His excited appeals to the fanaticism which exists in every Pathan were responded to in a manner little short of marvellous...the valour of the British arms fought against untold odds and emerged victorious...” (p. 35). Churchill (1898) notes that “When the northern savages, impelled by fanaticism...descended from the mountains and invaded the plains, they were met by equal courage and by superior discipline...” (p. 304). He says that the British then developed a “system of punitive expeditions, which has been derided as a policy of ‘Butcher and Bolt’” (p. 304).

The colonial depictions of the Pakhtuns, were, apart from the obvioust bias, based on events that occurred in the aftermath of such upheavals that had taken place in Pakhtun society. Furthermore, the relatively egalitarian democratic social and economic system based on *pakhtunwali* (Pakhtun code of conduct, discussed below), regarding land use, and *jirga* councils were disrupted., at first, due to some interference by the Mughal and Kabul states in their efforts to collect revenue from the tribal areas (Banerjee, 2000). However, the changes wrought once the British took over the area significantly altered the whole system. For instance, the British introduced their fundamentally different notion of ownership and granted permanent and exclusive ownership to some of the big khans (landowners) who supported them; this was not the case with most of the smaller khans (Banerjee, 2000; Shah, 2015). The big khans and maliks (secular chiefs) were favoured by the British, receiving financial and other forms of support in exchange for loyalty. They were often responsible for collecting taxes, imposing punitive measures, British laws and policies, and overall administration on behalf of the British (Banerjee, 2000). The British had certain mullahs (religious leaders) and the maliks and big khans do much of their propaganda work for them (Karim Khan, 1997). For many of the local people, their immediate sense of oppression was regarding these middlemen. Furthermore, there were policies and practices<sup>4</sup> that cut off access to certain parts of the territory to some tribes, making it difficult for them to access grazing lands to which they previously had free access, including restricting water sources (Banerjee, 2000; Beattie, 1997). These were specifically aimed to bring the tribes to their knees and force them to accept British occupation. Some of the blockades were intended to starve them by denial of access to the above-mentioned resources, killing cattle and people, including denial of passage to other non-tribal areas for trade (Williams, 2005). Given the roughness and sparseness of the terrain, the tribal people relied heavily on trade to fulfil some of their basic needs, so these blockades were quite devastating. These are some of the factors that created the conditions that led to feuding and raids. This is not to say that prior to these externally induced disruptions things were peaceful and just all the time. The point here is to understand what seems to be an excess of feuding and raiding, something that was a major source of distress for Ghaffar Khan and the Khudai Khidmatgar Movement (KKM) who sought to transform this situation. They, of course, unlike external observers who tend to attribute it to the system of *badal* or revenge, were aware of the reasons why their community had come to this state of constant feuding.

All cultures, as peace scholar Elise Boulding (1998) has noted, carry within them dual tendencies; practices that contribute to cultures of peace and violence. Human beings are not

innately peaceful or aggressive, and as she notes, both capacities are there, with different behaviors being manifest at different points, constantly having to balance both tendencies (note that they are not simple good and evil capacities). In response to varying circumstances these capacities, different skills and habits, which are part of what sociologist Ann Swidler (1986) calls cultural ‘tool kits,’ are mobilized in different ways. Swidler (1986) observes: “Culture does not influence how groups organize action via enduring psychological proclivities implanted in individuals by their socialization. Instead, publicly available meanings facilitate certain patterns of action, making them readily available” (p. 283). What is in their tool kit includes, “symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems” (p. 273). These provide certain strategies of action, a set of habits, skills and style, which are overall capacities, rather than values or ends. As she argues (1986), people may have some of the same ends or values in mind but go about achieving them quite differently based on the capacities and habits they have built up; people can pull out justification from religious teachings and so on to support contradictory actions. Boulding’s point is that it is not that certain cultures value peace over violence or vice versa, they are constantly trying to balance them. This need to balance nonviolent, egalitarian, violent, hierarchical, and other ways of doing things, requires that they reach into the cultural tool kit for certain modes of actions and skills which can be mobilized. But as Swidler (1986) notes, values are not good predictors of action in unsettled times. She says:

In unsettled periods, in contrast, cultural meanings are more highly articulated and explicit, because they model patterns of action that do not ‘come naturally.’ Belief and ritual practice directly shape action for the community that adheres to a given ideology. Such ideologies are, however, in competition with other sets of cultural assumptions. Ultimately, structural and historical opportunities determine which strategies, and thus which cultural systems, succeed. (p. 284)

We will discuss below how this relates specifically to the Pakhtun concept of *badal*, (basically a cultural guideline regarding the importance of reciprocity, good and bad, interpreted narrowly as revenge), which has been attributed the status of a cultural value or end in itself (especially by outsiders), rather than a habit or mode of action which responds to given structural and historical circumstances. My point is that given the relentless turbulence experienced by the Pakhtuns, described above, it is not surprising that the negative vengeful aspect of it was relied on and even valorised, because it offered the best defence against what they faced constantly. However, the problem is that what works in some situations may not work in others and it becomes a liability, with armed struggle being the mode of action even within the community to the neglect of the many virtuous traditions of *pakhtunwali*; which is where Ghaffar Khan and the KKM come in, as we shall see below.

In addition to these actual behaviours and responses, which as I have noted, are not all unproblematic, we have the colonial characterizations I have described above. Subaltern Studies scholars such as Ranajit Guha have offered useful ways of interpreting and understanding some of these colonial accounts of historical events, given the lack of written material that present the peasant/indigenous stories (most of what is available is in Pashto, and a lot of material was destroyed). The subalterns are the most marginalized in colonial and global societies, who do not have access to writing their stories, due to illiteracy, and lack of social power, or the necessary platforms. Even when native voices are presented, it is that of native elite who do not necessarily reflect the perspectives or interests of the subalterns. Therefore, it is necessary when reading such historical material to employ a form of optics or

lens that enables one to read between the lines. Thus, peasant insurrections, riots, raiding and so on are far from the fanatical raiding of wild and crazed savages, but often the utilization of the only means available to defend lives and interests. Guha (1999) provides a set of “translations” of the colonial language about tribal/indigenous uprisings and insurgencies.

“...official document speaks of *badmashes* as participants in rural disturbances, this does not mean (going by the normal sense of that Urdu word) any ordinary collection of rascals but peasants involved in a militant agrarian struggle. In the same context, a reference to any ‘dacoit village’ (as one comes across so often in the Mutiny narratives) would indicate the entire population of a village united in resistance to the armed forces of the state: ‘contagion—the enthusiasm and solidarity generated by an uprising among various rural groups within a region; ‘fanatics’—rebels inspired by some kinds of revivalist or puritanical doctrines; ‘lawlessness’—the defiance by the people of what they had come to regard as bad laws, and so on.” (p. 17)

He points out that this sort of language was used to designate the ‘rival consciousness’ of the rebels who wished to turn the world upside down, their struggle for justice and survival, as crimes. Even Ghaffar Khan and the KKM were declared criminal.

What is apparent in the accounts by Churchill and others is that you have an invading force that has travelled far from their own territory to profit from other people’s lands and labor, or if we accept some of the colonial justifications, to civilize and bring progress to the savages. If the latter, it would seem, that like the supposedly fanatical tribesmen, they too are willing to shed copious amounts of blood of their ‘beneficiaries’ and value their own life so little (an accusation against the tribesmen) as to risk such an enterprise. When the tribesmen fight fearlessly, “they are fanatical mad dogs,” but when the British fight they have “courage and valour, engage in punitive expeditions, and display British might.” This lack of self-reflection, of viewing events through a biased framework, had normalized the right of the ‘superior’ races to impose their interests and will over others to such an extent that in their calculus black and brown lives and civilizations do not matter. This is reflected quite brilliantly in Churchill’s statement that the religion of peace comes well-armed. In most readings of such historical accounts, the British get excused for their behaviour because our current sensitivities are said to be anachronistic--the tribesmen are not. Their actions, albeit in defence of their own land and freedom against invaders, are pathologized as their inherent nature.

This has to do with the problematic way in which violence is understood. Structural and other forms of violence do not get recognized as such, especially since those responsible for it are powerful; only the responses to such forms of violence are recognized and condemned as violent, and as problems to be solved. Slow violence, according to Nixon (2011) is, “...a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (p. 1). In this case, not even the brutal military assault and other obvious forms of violence get counted as such. A dogmatic approach in evaluating situations, which fails to distinguish between the desperate violence of the dispossessed and that of their oppressors, classifying and condemning both parties, and more often just the dispossessed, as “violent” and failing to display the virtue of nonviolence, we inadvertently end up upholding systems of oppression. It is possible to promote nonviolence without such simplistic dichotomizing of violence and nonviolence. It is in such a context that the KKM start their activities, the Islamic call to wage *jihad* to restore justice and prevent what is wrong. In doing

so, they reach into the Pashtun and Islamic tool kits, restoring what has been forgotten, reshaping what had got distorted, learning from outsiders, such as Gandhi, who were also inspired by God.

### **Resources for Peace Culture: *Pakhtunwali* and Islam**

In this section I discuss some aspects of Pakhtun culture and Islam in light of the skills, beliefs, habits and stories that can and were lifted out from the tool kit by Ghaffar Khan and the KKM (discussed in the following section). Elise Boulding (2000) describes peace culture as:

... peace culture is a culture that promotes peaceable diversity. Such a culture includes lifeways, patterns of belief, values, behaviour, and accompanying institutional arrangements that promote mutual caring and well-being as well as an equality that includes appreciation of difference, stewardship, and equitable sharing of the earth's resources among its members and with all living beings...the societal capacity for aggression or peacebuilding depends on patterns developed in every domain, from the individual and the interpersonal to the national, and interenvironmental...(p. 1)

The Pakhtun code of conduct is known as *pakhtunwali*; dating back over a thousand years (Banerjee, 2000), which entails certain notions that serve as guides in various aspects of life, from economic, social, religious, to political (Taj, 2011). Much of the practices and skills of the KKM were derived from *pakhtunwali*. This includes the notion of *melmastia* or hospitality, which requires loyalty and protection not only to friends and allies, but even hospitality to enemies who may seek refuge within your home (Banerjee, 2000; Saikal, 2010). Another concept is *nanawati*, translated as forgiveness (Taj, 2011) and the giving of sanctuary even to enemies (Banerjee, 2000). Also, the often talked about *badal*, which is the call to respond to insult or injury-considered a form of vengeance (Banerjee, 2000; Saikal, 2010; Taj, 2011). However, scholars have pointed out that it has a broader meaning of reciprocity, which can include reciprocating good and bad actions (Arbab, 2017). Another concept is *nang*, which has been interpreted as the “the protection of sexual propriety” (Saikal, 2010, p. 5), and maintaining a sense of honor and integrity (Banerjee, 2000). Banerjee notes that this can be associated with the concept of *purdah*, which includes the seclusion of women and also the honorable organization of domestic life, and *jirga* (this will be discussed further below), which is the honorable organization of public life. Farhat Taj (2011) points out that while *pakhtunwali* requires equality among all Pakhtun, it can be gender discriminatory. The *jirga* is an elected group of elders. She notes that the code includes artistic expression, and, also, living in peace with Muslims and non-Muslims. Another major aspect of Pakhtun culture since the seventh century is Islam, in the form of the more liberal Sunni Hanifi School (Mahmoud Hanifi, 2016; Saikal, 2010).

The *jirga* is a decision-making council of elders convened as the need arises, usually initiated by local community members or groups, and as such, it is not a permanent committee. It has the mandate to settle disputes regarding land, access to water, inheritance, and overall maintenance of peace and order (Shah, 2015). Equality is very important within Pakhtun culture as well as within Islam, and this system of need-based *jirga* ensured a level of equality and democracy as consensus is required. The lack of permanence prevented any one group of elders or members of the community becoming too powerful. M. Jamil Hanifi (2004) notes that “it is the symbol of tribal autonomy” (pp. 297-298). Another significant aspect of *pakhtunwali* was the system of *wesh* requiring periodical redistribution of land among owners or khans, ensuring that any one group or tribe did not have permanent hold of

certain parts of the land; as Banerjee (2000) points out, this was a way of maintaining the egalitarianism central to *pakhtunwali*. Given the roughness of the terrain, not all parts of the landscape would have been fertile or easy to access, so land ownership was not exclusive with a lot of fluidity in the use of the land. The British invasion disrupted some of these practices introducing high levels of inequality. These are some of the problems that exercised Ghaffar Khan's mind, which led to the formation of the KKM, which was active between the dates of 1929-30 to around 1947, and was banned in 1948 by the Muslim League who were in charge of the newly formed country of Pakistan (Banerjee, 2000).

The founder of the KKM, Ghaffar Khan, was from the family of a small khan (landed elite), his father choosing not to collaborate with the British. His brother had gone to England to study and returned as a doctor. Khan himself had the opportunity to go to England, recommended by the British missionary Rev. Wigram who ran the school he attended. Khan's mother pleaded for him not to leave, so he decided to stay. Another prestigious thing to do was to join the Guides, which was the local British military service. Until this point in his late teens, he had not given much thought to British rule and its effects. He was offered a commission in the Guides (in addition to his education, he was a very tall strong man, well suited for the military) and was about to join when he had an awakening. He saw that a fellow Pakhtun young man who was a member of the Guides was expected to bow down in deference to fellow white soldiers; that was when he realized that they were never going to be treated as equals and he refused to accept any British commission (Banerjee, 2000; Easwaran, 1984). Having seen the repeated failures of the violent uprisings, and the unbearable nature of British oppression, he was desperate for guidance. This is when he decided to seek help from God; Ghaffar Khan was a man of faith, and it was central to all he did (Easwaran, 1984). He went into a mosque and fasted and prayed on his knees, occasionally shifting to sit cross legged, for several days, asking God for strength and guidance. When he was done, although he did not know exactly what he was going to do, he felt he was a different man and had a powerful sense of awareness and the strength of God: "Islam! Inside him, the word began to explode with meaning. Islam! Submit! Surrender to the Lord and know his strength!" (Easwaran, 1984, p. 71). He knew he had to dedicate himself to the service of God, and that was through humble service to the oppressed people. Easwaran likens this process to the experience of St. Francis of Assisi. From then on, Khan acted with a deep sense of purpose and commitment only matched by that of Gandhi.

His soul searching and delving into the Quran and hadith of the Prophet taught him several things. Islam is quintessentially a religion of justice, and the notion of the abode of Islam often refers to a society where justice prevails. As such, it is feasible that a non-Muslim society in which justice prevails could be considered an abode of Islam (El Fadl, 2007). The prime Islamic imperative is very much about the demand on every Muslim to fight against injustice and oppression, not only in defense of Muslims but others as well (Abu-Nimer, 2001; El Fadl, 2007). As peace scholar Mohammed Abu-Nimer (2001) points out, in Islam, justice and peace are interconnected and interdependent. It is the duty of every believer to ensure justice prevails, for peace is an outcome of it. Crooke (2009) observes, "The radicalism of Islam therefore lay in the command to build a community in which men and women behaved with compassion, with respect for others—whatever their standing in life—in which there was a fair distribution of wealth... Muslims are commanded actively and literally to fight daily for justice and for human respect and compassion" (p. 7). This entails the imperative of commanding right and forbidding wrong in many aspects of life, which is not just about rescuing those in trouble, but attempting to prevent injustice or wrong in the first place; a duty of every Muslim (Cook, 2006). It is a call to action. Khan (1969) says:

“Religion teaches man truth, justice and virtue, and it awakens in the man the desire to serve... The Holy Prophet Mohammed... said, ‘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 fellowmen” (p. 231). He points out that the Pakhtuns and Muslims in general have forgotten the Prophet’s teachings and example, including the warnings against greed, wealth, power, the importance of democracy, the rights of women, and so on (Ghaffar, 1969). He preached that these are the reasons why they had fallen into the practices of feuding with each other and not giving women their due rights.

As to strategies of action, in delving into early Islamic history and the life of the Prophet, Khan saw that peace and nonviolent resistance indeed was what was enjoined by Quranic teaching. While he acknowledges that in the later Medina period the Prophet engaged in armed struggle, it was only in order to prevent the ongoing death and destruction, and it was in a context in which they had some hope of it being effective without leading to even more deaths. It is important to note that the call to struggle for justice, preventing wrong and promoting right, in Islamic teaching, comes with ample warnings and examples cautioning against an overzealous implementation of these imperatives that ends up being more unjust and destructive than the wrong one seeks to avert (Cook, 2006). Therefore, every effort to do justice and good has to be evaluated judiciously with prayer. We see this throughout Ghaffar Khan’s life and action. He realized that not only were the violent uprisings backfiring, the constant feuding among the tribes was also making them weak and subservient to the British (Banerjee, 2000).

As to the primacy of nonviolence, again, he drew on Quranic and early Islamic teachings. During the persecution of the Meccans, the Prophet asked the Muslims to endure and never retaliate. Many of them stood without renouncing their faith when facing of the brutality of Meccans, even watching their elderly parents or family members being killed, without raising a weapon against them (Ramadan, 2007). The Quranic and Prophetic teachings emphasizing the transience of this life, eternal values, and God as ultimate refuge, were a great source of strength and encouragement when faced with unbearable abuse. Also, within the Pakhtun cultural codes discussed above, the imperative to offer refuge to enemies, among other practices, required Pakhtuns to control their animosity, to exercise a high level of self-control and refrain from taking revenge. Here was the deep cultural resource that could be drawn out for nonviolent endurance of torture, which was potent, when combined with the Pakhtun fearlessness.

Along with the tendency to de-Pakhtunize Ghaffar Khan and the KKM by making them seem an aberration, there is also the tendency to de-Islamicize them. Among some who speak of the movement, there seems to be a reluctance to talk about how deeply Islamic this movement was, and those who do, often imply that Khan came up with his own peculiar interpretation, reading Gandhi’s nonviolence into the Islamic teachings, or only picking out the bits of Islamic teaching that support nonviolence. As I have noted above, cultures and religions have multiple tendencies, and shaping a nonviolent response entails choice no matter what the religion or culture. Gandhi himself, drew his commitment to nonviolence from the Baghavad Gita, which was delivered in the middle of a battlefield, where Lord Krishna exhorts the warrior Arjuna to fight the oppressive foes, while setting this mode of action within the broader and more final teaching of the moral and spiritual supremacy of nonviolence. That is, this final goal entails a higher level of spiritual evolution and concomitant mode of being in the world. For one who is not yet at that level, fighting is undertaken out of a sense of duty. So nonviolence is not to be chosen out of cowardice (this is

something Gandhi emphasized), or partiality towards particular opponents, as was the case in Arjuna's reluctance, which was not due to an outright renunciation of violence per se (Gandhi & Desai, 1960; Raghuramaraju, 2020). Therefore, to claim that nonviolence and peace are the highest goals in Hinduism or Islam is not some kind of Gandhi-Khan innovation; both were well within legitimate theological traditions. Some Western scholars have endeavored to appreciate Islam as the source of Khan's inspiration, yet one sees the influence of prevailing misrepresentation of Islam (Johansen, 1997). One such scholar implies that being inspired by Gandhi and having implicit trust in him as a man of God, Khan interpreted the Quran accordingly, and that this may be because he was not theologically trained (Rowell, 2009).

Upholding nonviolence as the highest and most desirable goal does not necessarily entail a total pacifism that precludes acceptance or tolerance of armed violence in certain situations in a complex world. Khan and the KKM truly exemplified the core of the Islamic tradition, not just some pacified version of it (Abu-Nimer, 2001). They repeatedly spoke in terms of *jihad* (Banerjee, 2000) and Khan referred to the KKM as *mujahideen* (Tendulkar, 1967), and during their demonstrations, a common slogan was "*Allahu Akbar*" -- "God is Great" (Banerjee, 2000), reflecting their lived examples of what these terms really mean, rather than what many have come to associate them with in our current global situation. *Jihad* (struggle, effort) is a central and almost all-encompassing term in Islam, with what is known as the greater and more important *jihad* being the personal moral and spiritual struggle to obey God and purify one's thoughts and conscience, to exercise self-control, to forgive, show mercy and be charitable and just in all our dealings (Nasr, 2002). Similar to Gandhi's emphasis on *swaraj* (self-control) requiring control over one's senses and passions before exerting control over one's society and nation, Khan's efforts (greater *jihad*) in reform were about inculcating this inner spiritual and mental control out of which flowed the acts that lead to the construction of a just and peaceful society, as well as nonviolent resistance (lesser *jihad*). The lesser *jihad* includes armed struggle, but is generally the struggle against external injustices, preventing wrong and so on. Here again, the KKM use of the term lesser *jihad* to refer to their nonviolent resistance to British oppression is a perfect demonstration of the broader meaning of even the concept of lesser *jihad* (Banerjee, 2000). This is consistent with the Prophetic tradition: "The finest form of holy war is speaking out in the presence of an unjust ruler and getting killed for it" (Cook, 2006, p. 6). The call to wage jihad does not automatically mean armed struggle but resistance, like that of the KKM.

### **Khudai Khidmatgar Activities**

Khan was impressed with his school-teacher Rev. Wigram's commitment to service in teaching and he wanted to emulate it. At the same time, he was troubled by the British education offered; it was only accessible to the children of the landed elite and it served the interests of British rule. Some of the *mullahs* (religious leaders) ended up rejecting education altogether, arguing that it they would go to hell if they got educated (Ghaffar Khan, 1969). It is in this context that the efforts of Khan and the KKM were taking place. He dedicated himself to starting schools to educate the Pakhtun children. These *azad* or independent schools were aimed at creating pride in the Pashto language and culture; the children were taught Islamic values, mathematics, and a range of other subjects to provide them trade skills (Ullah Khan, 2017). Special emphasis was placed on educating girls. The schools were free, funded by community-raised money and were open to all regardless of caste or creed (Banerjee, 2000). However, they faced opposition from some of these *mullahs*, the bigger khans, and the British, who were all afraid that an educated peasantry would be harder to cheat and manipulate, and therefore, more likely to unite in solidarity against their oppression. Khan was arrested and put in jail (something that would keep happening

repeatedly; eventually he would spend about one third of his life in jail). The British used wealthy and powerful local men who were loyal to them to arrest peasants; the KKM would go and tend the crops of the latter (Shah, 2015).

Khan's efforts had mainly focused on what they called the constructive program to improve the lives of the Pakhtuns. However, with the constant repressions and brutality on the part of the British, he realized that this was not going to be possible as long as the British were in control. This led him to create the youth league of the *zalmu jirga*, who were young literate Pakhtuns, and later, the creation of the KKM which included illiterate and older men and women (Shah, 2015). Many of the smaller khans supported and joined the KKs, including many of the Ulema (religious scholars) and some mullahs (Shah, 2015). Different groups joined the movement for different reasons. As Shah (2015) observes:

To the Pashtoon intelligentsia, it was a movement for the revival of Pashtoon culture with its distinct identity. To the smaller Khans, [however,] it was a movement that demanded political reforms for the province that would enfranchise them and give them a greater role in the governance. Its anti-colonial stand suited the majority of the anti-establishment Ulema, who always regarded British rule in the sub-continent as a 'curse'. For the peasants and other poor classes it was against their economic oppressors, British imperialism and its agents – the pro-British Nawabs, Khan Bahadurs and the big Khans (pp. 95-96).

The KK training emphasized discipline and military-like training, including physical fitness. Banerjee (2000) notes, "While the KKs did not explicitly articulate this kind of holism, their combining of physical fitness (through the discipline imposed by drill and parades) with moral fitness (the cessation of feuding and forgiveness of past enemies) can be seen as an analogous preparation of healthy citizens to challenge the decay of colonial rule" (p. 87). This was part of the holistic *jihad*, or *swaraj* in Gandhian terminology. They had ranks and were organized like a military, including a uniform. This was the famous Red Shirt. The British tried to use the colour of their uniforms to accuse them of being Bolsheviks; however, the reason they ended up with this colour was because white uniforms tended to get dirty as they went around doing their social services, and being mostly poor, they only had access to this brown/red colour in their territory (Banerjee, 2000; Shah, 2015). In addition to their role in education, the KKs were involved in maintaining hygiene (Banerjee, 2000). They often walked around with a broomstick, and the *charkha* or spinning wheel, which were all aimed at attaining self-sufficiency. A major part of their reform, also derived from the Islamic tradition, concerned transforming the oppressive aspects of the *pardah*, which included doing away with women wearing veils. Khan (1929) stated "no nation can awake unless its women are awakened first, and no nation can progress unless its women progress first, and, similarly, a nation cannot get true independence unless its women rise up" (p. 25, quoted in Karim Khan, 1997, p. 332). Khan pointed out that the Pakhtuns had forgotten this important teaching from the Quran and the life of the Prophet who had struggled to give women rights to inheritance, to not be married off against their will, and so on. The KKM introduced all these changes in Pakhtun society. The KKs included many women who gave speeches, including Khan's sister, and they engaged in resistance activities, including marching with the Holy Quran on their heads (Banerjee, 2000; Shah, 2015).<sup>5</sup> Khan also started a local newsletter, the *Pakhtun*, to which women contributed significantly, challenging patriarchy in their writings.

*The Mischaracterization of the Pakhtun-Islamic Peace Culture*  
*Created by Abdul Ghaffar Khan and the Khudai Khidmatgars*

Due to the difficulty of the terrain, the relative isolation, and the tight control the British established, it was extremely difficult for reporters or other observers to come from outside, and the British censored the material that went out (Shah, 2007). This meant that the British had a free hand in what they did to the people in the Frontier. As brutal and cruel as their actions were within the rest of the subcontinent, the punishments they meted out to the KKKs reached into a whole different stratosphere (Johansen, 1997). They were beaten, their properties were robbed and set on fire, the privacy of their homes violated, and whole villages were punished. Supplies to their training camps were poisoned (Banerjee, 2000). Khan himself was beaten mercilessly several times and had broken ribs (Shah, 2015; Tendulkar, 1967). Given the emphasis on sexual propriety and modesty in Pakhtun culture, one of the favourite ways of punishing the KKKs was to strip them naked and make them march in public, often being prodded in their private parts with weapons, castrated and molested (and much worse). Some of these extended to such pornographic and cruel extents that they make Abu Ghraib look like child-play (Banerjee, 2000; Shah, 2015). There were several massacres, the most famous of which is the one on the 23 April 1930 at the Qissa Khwani Bazaar, where over 200 of them were massacred (Banerjee, 2000; Shah, 2015). Another significant event was when a platoon of the Indian Garhwal rifles refused to fire at the unarmed people, and were dismissed and punished (Karim Khan, 1997; Tendulkar, 1967). In all these instances, the KKKs did not retaliate, and endured with a sort of stoic majesty. This ability had been inculcated through all their discipline, which included engaging in menial tasks, to foster a sense of humility and calmness (Banerjee, 2000). Before joining the KKM, each one was asked to make sure they resolved all feuds they may have had, and many of them found their own creative and touching means of doing so without Ghaffar Khan's involvement. Again, this was intended to ensure they developed their own abilities in making peace (Banerjee, 2000). All these events led to more people joining the movement in defiance; eventually they numbered around 100,000 (Arbab, 2017).

Khan's imprisonment and the brutality inflicted on the KKKs led Khan to the realization that they could not survive or resist the British on their own (Shah, 2015). They at first sought the support of the Muslim League, who turned them down because they did not want to resist the British (Banerjee, 2000). The only choice was the All India National Congress to which Gandhi belonged. Once the rest of India came to know about them they at least had some degree of protection. Khan and Gandhi became very close, and as two deeply spiritual men, they had more in common with each other than with any of the other leaders. However, relying on the only available accounts of the Pakhtuns, Gandhi had at first been sceptical about the prospect of nonviolent Pakhtuns. After actually getting to know them and talking to them, Gandhi became their biggest fan and claimed they best exemplified his notion of nonviolence; which is very often misunderstood even in peace circles. This is obvious in the following conversation that Khan (1969) had with Gandhi:

I said to Gandhiji: 'Gandhiji, you have been preaching non-violence in India for a long time now, but I started teaching the Pathans non-violence only a short time ago. Yet, in comparison, the Pathans seem to have learned this lesson and grasped the idea of non-violence much quicker and much better than the Indians...in spite of all the cruelty and the oppression the British inflicted upon them, not one Pathan resorted to violence, though they, too, possess the instruments of violence. How do you explain that?'

Gandhiji replied: 'Non-Violence is not for cowards. It is for the brave, the courageous. And the Pathans are more brave and courageous than the Hindus. That is the reason why the Pathans were able to remain non-violent' (pp. 193-194).

Something that is often underestimated is the deeply spiritual nature of this movement. Khan repeatedly emphasized that this was not just a social or political movement but a spiritual movement. The creation of a culture of peace requires true emancipation in every aspect of life, from the spiritual to the political. This is perhaps the single-most explanation or secret of the phenomenal success of the KKM and their profound ability to endure unspeakable brutalities unleashed on them by the British. Yet, the oppressive forces around them were ruthless against them.

### **Diversity, Partition and Suppression**

As part of their divide and rule policies, the British were relentless in their promotion of the Muslim League, who were mostly anti-Hindu and wanted to create Pakistan as a separate country (Banerjee, 2000; Shah, 2015). To foster support for the Muslim League, a major tactic was propaganda creating fear among Muslims that the Hindus, who outnumbered them in India, would suppress them if the British left (Shah, 2015). This meant that they were more likely to want the British to remain. The propaganda and fears over what might happen if independence did materialize gave rise to violence between Hindus and Muslims in different parts of India. The British and the Muslim League would then use the examples of Hindu attacks to create fear among the Muslims, especially among the Pakhtuns. However, the North West Frontier Province of the Pakhtuns was the only Muslim majority region where despite all the efforts of the British and the Muslim League, the latter failed to get a foothold. Michael Cook (2006) refers to studies that indicate that those who habitually engage in actions of rescue and the attempt to prevent wrong, in addition to being courageous, tend to be less likely to discriminate between people. This characteristic was clearly apparent among the KKM members and their actions. This tolerant embrace of difference was exemplified by Ghaffar Khan and the KKs and other Pakhtuns as well. When Muslims who supported the Muslim League attacked Hindus and Sikhs, the KKs went in to act as human shields to protect them against the attacks of their co-religionists. Non-Muslim villagers who escaped from their villages, returned without fear, due to this protection. Not only the KKs, but some other like-minded Muslim tribes formed “peace committees,” to protect the lives and property of the non-Muslims (Shah, 2015). They also made the commitment to struggle for the liberation of Hindustan (India), which says a lot about their religious tolerance (Shah, 2007).

Arbab (2017) notes:

...the Khudai Khidmatgar ideology of nonviolence and its politics of friendship were attempting to iterate an alternative set of normativities that were in stark contradiction to the long lineage of normative Western political philosophy that structures the state (p. 227).

These are the makings of peace culture. Arbab (2017) says the Muslim League had adopted the “epistemological frameworks and normative standards in which violence was (and continues to be) considered an inevitable norm” (p. 227). For instance, a culture of peace operates on a respect for diversity of interests and is willing to act on good will and take the associated risks; the culture of violence seeks to control every outcome through the use of force/power over the other. The insistence on the formation of a separate country from those who were different, in this case Hindus, was based on eschewing good will for the power and access to violent force that statehood entailed. As feminist scholar Sharon Welch (1990) notes, “The only type of power that is guaranteed to be successful is destructive power. One

can ensure the death of an enemy, but one cannot ensure the cooperation of another in mutually fulfilling transforming work. The pursuit of guaranteed total fulfilment produces the destruction of life” (p. 120). The Pakhtuns, with the guidance of the KKM, represented something diametrically opposed to the logic of British imperialism and notion of civilization. Gandhi had always said that the British could stay but it was their form of civilization (which represented the culture of violence) that violated *swaraj*, and therefore, had to go. This was the same with the KKM. The greater *jihad* to control one’s passions or *swaraj* in Gandhi’s terminology was the deeper source of spiritual force.

Thus, as Ghaffar Khan (1969) recalls, “The British used to say, ‘a non-violent Pathan is more dangerous than a violent Pathan’” (p. 145). By banning Ghaffar Khan from the region for significant periods when he was not kept in jail, and along with him, many of the KKM, the Muslim League was eventually able to get some support, especially among the wealthy, big khans and mullahs who were under British pay, as well as some in the tribal areas where Ghaffar Khan and the KKM had been banned from entering. Despite this, when Ghaffar Khan’s brother as the Congress representative for the region contested in 1947, Congress won decisively. Ghaffar Khan mentions how the British government had closed the school, getting students to canvass for the Muslim League, and British women had gone around canvassing for them (Ghaffar Khan, 1969). This was a clear indication that the Pakhtuns had no issue with the Hindus, and therefore, were against partition. This is why, when the Muslim League insisted on partition, and Congress under Jawaharlal Nehru agreed to it, accepting the British proposal to hold a referendum (whether they would join India or Pakistan) in the region, Ghaffar Khan and the KKM boycotted the whole thing as they considered it an insult to the Pakhtun people (Ghaffar Khan, 1969). This meant that the only ones who did vote were mostly those who had been won over by the Muslim League, and they voted for Pakistan; in addition, there had been major fraud involved in the voting (Ghaffar Khan, 1969; Shah, 2015). Ghaffar Khan and the KKM felt that if partition was going to happen, the Pakhtuns should at least have been given autonomy over their region rather than be forced to live under the Congress Party in India that had abandoned them, or the Muslim League that represented everything they had opposed (Arbab, 2017; Shah, 2015). Ghaffar Khan said that they had been thrown to the wolves; the two spiritual leaders, Gandhi and Khan, who led possibly the most powerful nonviolent movements the world has seen, were left heartbroken. Neither of them participated in the independence celebrations. The anguish they both felt is clear in Gandhi’s words, “I cannot bear to see Badshah Khan’s grief. His inner agony wrings my heart. But, if I gave way to tears, it would be cowardly, and the stalwart Pathan as he is, he would break down” (quoted in Tendulkar, 1967, p. 422). Gandhi had intended to go to Pakistan to support the Pakhtuns and Khan, but he was assassinated by a fellow Hindu. Khan and most of the KKM were put in jail for a long period and the KKM was banned by the new country of Pakistan. Thus, despite the relentless persistence the Pakhtuns showed in their desire to construct a peace culture, from the commitment to nonviolence, to gender issues and diversity, they were “ruthlessly suppressed” by the British and then the Pakistan they created (Jansson, 1991).

## **Conclusion**

The imperative to take a second look at how Pakhtuns are depicted even in accounts of Khan and the KKM, is ever more important now. As the scholar Taj (2011) points out, the misrepresentation of *pakhtunwali* has led to attributing the presence of the Taliban amongst some of them to their notions such as hospitality and forgiveness. Even these virtues of their culture are represented as vices. However, hospitality requires the guest or enemy to surrender their weapons, which the Taliban have not done, and as several scholars familiar

with the culture and region have noted, the Taliban engaged in massive suppression and killing of Pakhtun elders and other people; eventually, some of them have ended up joining them (Ghufran, 2009; Rothing & Taj, 2011), like they did when constraints forced them into joining Pakistan. My discussion above shows that much within the culture and Islamic beliefs of the Pakhtuns, as exemplified in their preference for Ghaffar Khan and the KKM, leans in the direction of peace culture and is diametrically opposed to everything the Taliban enforces. If peace scholars fail to see amongst these people, despite the troubling behavior of some among them, all the virtues I have described above, we continue to valorize the KKM in a way that defeats their cause—a culture of peace for the Pakhtuns. Thus, we continue to “tyrannize and outrage” them, throwing them to the wolves, as Ghaffar Khan lamented, providing the structures that are only conducive to the cultural tools that promote violence.

### **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> \*The author presented this paper on 8 July, 2020, at the Research Seminar of the Faculty of Theology and Philosophy, Australian Catholic University, Signadou (Canberra) Campus, and would like to thank the participants for their feedback.

<sup>2</sup> The terms Pakhtun, Pashtun and Pathan are used to refer to the same group of people, often depending on particular dialects and how the Pashto word may be transcribed in English (Arbab, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> This list of people who came in through this pass includes the Aryans, Persians, Greeks, Scythians, White Huns, Mongols, Muslims, among others.

<sup>4</sup> There were a range of approaches the British took to subdue the tribal people. Due to the cost of military operations, at first they adopted what was a “close border” policy of using non-military forms of manipulations to extract revenue and maintain access and control, eventually this gave way to the “Forward Policy,” which was outright military conquest. See for instance, the following discussion of British strategies and errors as guidelines for current operations (Williams, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Banerjee notes that arbitrators and peacemakers in Pakhtun tradition carried the Quran on their heads as a symbol of reconciliation. Tendulkar (1967) describes it as a gesture of a humiliated weaker party asking for pardon. However, Tendulkar seems to have relied heavily on colonial sources, as noted by other scholars such as Sruti Bala (2013).

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