

# PEACEMAKER FROM THE PAST

Bacha Khan's Challenge  
to Radical Islamic Narrative

**BILQUEES  
DAUD**

## INTRODUCTION

I am going to give you such a weapon that the police and the army will not be able to stand against it. It is the weapon of the Prophet, but you are not aware of it. That weapon is forgiveness and righteousness. No power on earth can stand against it (Easwaran, 1985: 117).

**T**hese powerful words were spoken by Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, famously referred to as Frontier Gandhi and/or Bacha Khan (1890–1988), one of the first Muslim leaders to practise non-violence. He was born into a Pashton family, and being a Pashton/Pathan<sup>1</sup> by tribe, he was perceived to be, as are all Pashtons in colonial and anthropologists' narratives, a man with a sword-and-temper attitude. In reality, Bacha Khan was not only a devoted Muslim, but also a man of peace and love. He believed that '...a non-violent Pathan...is more dangerous than a violent Pathan' (Gandhi, 2004: 90).

Bacha Khan's background as a Muslim and a Pathan made his struggle for non-violence unique as he was able to change the discourse of Pathans as tempestuous people. Living in the North West Frontier Province of British India, currently the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) province of Pakistan, Khan believed that 'we would have fared ill if we had not learnt the lessons of non-violence. We are born fighters and we keep the tradition by fighting among ourselves... [Thus]...this non-violence has come to us as a positive deliverance' (Tendulkar, 1967: 295).

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*Summer 2019, Volume 46, Number 1*

Yet, following the collapse of the British Empire and the creation of Pakistan, to which he was opposed because of its communal foundations, Bacha Khan found himself and his philosophy of non-violence increasingly rejected. This stemmed from two factors: first, his opposition to the creation of Pakistan, and, subsequently, his opposition to the continued incorporation of Pashton areas that had been divided by the British by drawing an artificial line—the Durand line—that led to him being imprisoned for much of his life (A. Ahmad, 2005: 26). Second, the growing radicalisation of Islam, owing to alliances between military rulers and mullahs, coupled with the huge flow of armaments into the region by the West after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, did much to undermine his work.

However, Bacha Khan was a towering figure; so much so that when he passed away at the ripe old age of 98, KPP, the mujahedeen,<sup>2</sup> called for a cease fire, and the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan was thrown open to allow people to pay their last respects before he was laid to rest in Jalalabad, Afghanistan. Later, his passion and love for Afghanistan was given recognition by awarding him the title ‘Fakhre Afghani’, Pride of Afghans (Nitesh, 2012).

### **DISTINCTIVE APPROACH TO NON-VIOLENCE**

Bacha Khan preached to all his fellowmen and followers to give up weapons of violence and join Mahatma Gandhi’s satyagraha for the fight for freedom. ‘For Bacha Khan, the multi-religious secular Indian nation was a manifest reality which required no justifications in terms of Islamic theology or early Muslim history’ (A. Ahmad, 2005: 28). As Gandhi’s close companion, he held a similar vision of a secular, multi-religious and multi-national independent India. He was also able to demonstrate the use of the non-violent type of ‘jihad’ in Islam, while the current belief holds that Islam encourages the killing of infidels.

Nevertheless, Bacha Khan’s first political activity was his participation in the Annual Session of the All-India Muslim League in Agra, in 1913, followed by the Khilafat Movement. He then became the president of the Frontier Khilafat Committee. He was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi when he heard the latter for the first time in Congress in 1928. In his speech, Gandhi, as the leader of Hindus, though disturbed by the public, kept calm and patient,

while Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the leader of the party of which Bacha Khan was also a member, reacted very differently. Impressed by Gandhi, he criticised Jinnah for the use of inappropriate language; in response, Jinnah said, 'Look at these wild Pathans trying to teach me' (Korejo, 1994: 15). That was the moment Bacha Khan decided to adopt non-violent means for the freedom of his own people, and which became his creed.

His non-violent technique was successful over violent forms of protest because, at that time, if a Britisher was killed, not only was the offender punished by the British, but so was the entire village—the whole region would suffer. In contrast, by adopting non-violence, the protestors not only took personal suffering upon themselves by morally limiting the state's ability to exercise violence on the whole community, but also enabled the mobilisation of women who would not have taken part in violent political activity on a large scale.

Furthermore, this non-violent strategy also protected the community's future as it did not invite defensive measures from the British; rather, it provided room for debate. Bacha Khan is said to have famously remarked to Gandhi that 'We used to be so timid and indolent. The sight of an Englishman would frighten us. Our movement has instilled fresh life into us and made us more industrious. We have shed our fear and are no longer afraid of an Englishman' (Gandhi, 2004: 90).

Additionally, Bacha Khan stated: 'To me non-violence has come to represent a panacea for all the evils that surround my people...therefore, I am devoting all my energies towards the establishment of a society that would be based on its principles of truth and peace' (Easwaran, 1985: 196). Mukulika Banerjee (2000: 146) argues that Bacha Khan, although very much inspired by Gandhi, had adopted the dogma of non-violence well before his association with Gandhi '...through his own reflections on the needs and shortcomings of Pathan society'. In order to achieve that aim, he initially started a non-political organisation, *Anjuman-Isلاح-ul-Afghania*, to encourage 'economic, social and educational improvement in [the] Frontier' (Easwaran, 1985: 82), because he wanted his people to take to professions other than agriculture.

Later, in 1929, Bacha Khan established his own movement, *Khudai Khidmatgar* (KK; Servants of God), which was a social

movement rather than a political one. Initially, he selected fewer for the organisation, since he believed in ‘self-reform’ before ‘self-determination’. This phrase comes from Islam, which actually encourages ‘greater Jihad (Jihad-i-Akbar) that denotes [the] inner struggle of an individual to develop a true commitment to Islam and cultivate the spiritual qualities... [and then] lesser Jihad (Jihad-i-Asghar) [that] relates to legitimate military struggle and holy war against injustice’ (Banerjee, 2000: 148). Thus, the prerequisite for KK members was to incorporate internally a strong belief in non-violence in order to apply it. Moreover, unity was the foremost element, followed by non-cooperation as one of the techniques of non-violence. Soon, thousands of red-shirted KK volunteer members became a threat to the British, who labelled them ‘Servant[s] of Gandhi’ (Easwaran, 1985: 191). They were accused of helping Hindus to restrain Muslims.

The main objectives of the movement were social reform and providing education for the villagers. Significantly, this required Bacha Khan to call upon the Pashton code of conduct—*Pashtunwali*—that had served for centuries as the code for regulating much of community life. Moreover, Pashton society was not only patriarchal, but also valourised qualities of the warrior. Therefore, particularly challenging for him was the need to embed non-violent techniques into this social discourse, and so he sought to use the KK movement as an instrument of change. He vowed to replace the practice of revenge—*badal*—and other negative norms of the *Pashtunwali* code. Therefore, each member of KK was obliged to take the following vow:

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 refrain from anti-social customs and practices. I promise to live a simple life, to practise virtue and to refrain from evil. I promise to practise good manners and good behaviours, and not to live a life of idleness. I promise to devote at least two hours a day for social work (Narang, 1969: 97).

Besides local Pashton tribes, Hindus and Sikhs also participated actively in the movement, which indicates that Khan derived a positive idea of ‘universalist humanism’ from Islam and practised no discrimination against other religious minorities. Moreover, for ‘communal violence and Hindu–Muslim relations, he offered no constitutional but moral solutions: mutual dialogues and accommodations, a spirit of love and sacrifice, work for peace and persuasion, the building of the nation into an ethical community’ (A. Ahmad, 2005: 29). Religion was being used as a tool to conduct violence through the mobilisation of the illiterate and, therefore, he saw education as an essential tool towards the prosperity of society.

### **AN INCLUSIVE EDUCATIONAL STRATEGY**

The poverty, ignorance and violence prevalent in Bacha Khan’s village disturbed him, and he dreamed of providing education which he believed was the cure for all suffering. From 1897 to 1910, he established the first school in the village of Utmanzai at a time when the North West Frontier had ‘less than 100 schools’. This local school was an alternative to British schools, and the mullahs could find no reason to close it down. The schools grew and spread to other villages as well. Remarkably, the movement managed to establish and run 500 schools a century ago in a region where education faces daily threats even today. But Bacha Khan as a ‘rebel’ was soon arrested for the crime of spreading education among illiterate people (Easwaran, 1985: 84).

From the beginning, education was Bacha Khan’s main priority. He had himself studied in a British school where no Pathan would send his children. In colonial times, educating children at British schools was strictly forbidden by local mullahs who were in reality puppets of the British. ‘The British had implanted this idea into their minds that if the Pathans were to become educated and start thinking for themselves, the mullahs would lose their business. And there would be no more donation of money for them’ (Narang, 1969: 26). To challenge this mindset, KK members travelled from village to village to spread the message of peace and education.

Bacha Khan’s educational strategy focused mainly on gender equality. He believed that in Islam, women had equal rights to an education: ‘In the Holy Quran, you have an equal share with men. You are today oppressed because we men have ignored the

commands of God and the Prophet' (Gandhi, 2004: 104). His respect for women arose from his close attachment to his mother. He valued his mother's views and disliked the concept of 'purdah', which meant 'isolation of women from men'. In turn, his mother had high expectations of him, and trust, and would say, 'He is a strong man...and he will be Badshah, a king' (Easwaran, 1985: 42). And so he proved to be—king of non-violence resistance in the region.

However, his vision of educating women and involving them in efforts for justice would remain incomplete. The radicalisation and Islamisation of Pakistan/Afghanistan and their bordering areas are the result of an educational system that has always been used as a tool for propaganda to create divides and violence in society. For instance, during the war in Afghanistan, educational curricula suffered the greatest damage. The period of Sovietisation and Islamisation affected the system badly, making it an arena for political rivalry among the superpowers. Marked by drastic curricular changes, it has been used to establish 'ideological hegemony', while the Islamist resistance opened several schools for refugees in Peshawar and in territories controlled by them in the years of conflict (Olesen, 1995: 272). These schools, funded by the United States and Saudi Arabia, provided children textbooks with radical Islamic teachings and fierce depictions (Ottaway, 2002: 1).

In many refugee camps outside Afghanistan during late '80s and early '90s, Afghan schools for boys were provided with books that had pictures of guns, bombs, AK-47s, knives, and there were chapters about Jihad and killing invaders, while Afghan schools for girls were given different books with no such extremist and brainwashing propaganda. All these books were printed in Nebraska University and were distributed by [the] UN in refugee camps... following [are the] examples in a math book: If out of 10 atheists, 5 are killed by 1 Muslim, 5 would be left. 5 guns + 5 guns = 10 guns. 15 bullets – 10 bullets = 5 bullets, etc.<sup>3</sup>

The educational system, as key to developing a peaceful society, ought to encourage tolerance and coexistence instead of hatred. Bacha Khan's work and experiences, if incorporated in school curricula, can teach students that social and political change is equally possible by non-violent means. In particular, his manner

of dealing with non-Muslims, of raising social awareness about the importance of education for all—especially for women—of encouraging people to avoid negative cultural practices, and to work voluntarily for the betterment of their community, are examples to be transferred to the coming generations.

### **NON-VIOLENT INTERPRETATION OF ISLAM**

Bacha Khan believed that no boundary prevented the peaceful coexistence of multi-religious groups in society, a view at variance with the contemporary interpretation of Islam. He believed Islam to be the religion of peace and love, a fact not so well known to newer generations of South Asians.

It is my inmost conviction that Islam is *amal, yakeen, muhabat* [work, faith and love] and without these the name Muslim is sounding brass and tinkling cymbal. The Koran [Quran] makes it absolutely clear that faith in One God without a second, and good works are enough to secure a man his salvation (Easwaran, 1985: 61).

As a result, he started the non-violent form of jihad against the British from the Frontier (Korejo, 1994: 15). In contrast, the modern interpretation of Islam connects with the notion of violent jihad against infidels. Bacha Khan held that the Quran ‘commands struggle for injustice in the form of Jihad...it also commands patience as virtue, both in triumph and in suffering...since it is patience which prevents hatred and aggression’ (Banerjee, 2000: 147). As the *Al Shura* (42: 43) of the Quran says:

*Be indeed if any  
Show patience and forgive  
That would truly be  
An exercise of courageous will  
And resolution in the conduct of affairs* (ibid.: 147).

Consequently, the Quran characterises stronger men as those with great patience and forgiveness, which was preached similarly by Bacha Khan as the basis for non-violence. Just as the *Surah Al Maidah* (5: 45) ‘recognizes the duty to seek justice...it also recommends the renunciation of retaliation for the sake of personal atonement.

Revenge is honorable, but forgiveness is still more so' (Banerjee, 1999: 196). Thus, forgiving one's opponent is an act of bravery, not weakness—and that requires self-discipline.

Today, this issue has been discussed by other Islamic scholars who have sought to examine the relationship between Islam and non-violence. Chaiwat Satha-Anand (2001: 9), in his analysis of the verses of the Quran, mentions that 'Jihad means to stand up to oppression, despotism, and injustice (whenever it is committed) and on behalf of the oppressed (whoever they may be)...Jihad is an effort, a striving for justice and truth that need not be violent [but] put an end to the structural violence'. In other words, the fight in Allah's cause essentially means the fight for justice to achieve peace.

To quote Bacha Khan: 'The Holy Quran had said that God had sent messengers to all people....Hindus, too, were Ahl-e-Kitab, or people of the Book...the Books named in the Quran were illustrative; there could be others' (Gandhi, 2004: 104). Evidently, Islam does not allow the killing of non-Muslims because God created humankind as one nation, but as different people. Thus, he asks people to settle differences amongst themselves peacefully. The following verses (10: 19) and (5: 32) prove that human lives are precious and Islam considers killing a major sin.

*Mankind was but one nation,  
But differed (later). Had it not  
Been for a Word  
That went forth before  
From thy Lord, their differences  
Would have been settled  
Between them.*

...

*And if anyone saved a life,  
It would be as if he saved  
The life of the whole people (Satha-Anand, 2001: 16).*

Likewise, Gandhi believed that religions the world over are more similar than they are different, since all have the same aim—to reach the one God. He said: 'By religion, I do not mean formal religion, or

customary religion, but that religion which underlies all religions, which brings us face to face with our maker' (R. Ahmad, 2001: 33). For him, truth was God, and thus seeking the truth through non-violent means a holy duty. He stated that God is the same in all religions, including Islam. Moreover, he claimed that 'I have as much regard in my heart for Islam and all other religion[s] as for my own...though the sword has been wielded in the history of Islam and that too in the name of religion, Islam was not founded by the sword, nor was its spread due to it' (Gandhi, 2004: 118).

In the same way, it is written in the Quran (5: 69) that:

*Those who believe (in the Quran)*  
*Those who follow the Jewish (scriptures)*  
*And the Sabians and the Christians—*  
*Any who believe in Allah*  
*And the Last Day,*  
*And work righteousness—*  
*On them shall be no fear,*  
*Nor shall they grieve (Mohideen, 2001: 128).*

Accordingly, the claim that Islam, as a divine religion, does not cooperate with others does not appear to be based on sound theological knowledge. Therefore, Bacha Khan's contribution to its non-violent practise is exceptional, as he opposed the conventional interpretation of Islam.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Bacha Khan's legacy offers a unique and legitimate counter narrative to violence and religious extremism, being rooted not only in Islamic tradition, but also in local culture, thus making it extremely difficult to dismiss. I believe that through education and a non-violent interpretation of Islam we can spread his message of mutual coexistence across boundaries. His philosophy is relevant not only to Afghanistan and Pakistan, but also to the region as a whole. I make two suggestions to help establish Bacha Khan's legacy.

First, in order to prevent youth from joining Islamic groups, the education system must be reformed. In its current form it encourages violence based on religions, sects and races. The education that brainwashes our children to dislike others ought

to be substituted with one based on peace and the theory of non-violence. Therefore, the younger generation needs to be familiarised with real-life stories of leaders who have served as agents of non-violent change, such as Bacha Khan, Gandhi and Mandela, who used non-violence as a tool across time, culture and space. Moreover, history books in schools ought to give a better understanding of the country's social and religious diversity.

Second, I propose that Muslims around the world work together to re-introduce peaceful interpretations of Islamic texts and the Prophet's sayings. In other words, more research, academic work and publications are required in the region on Islam and Bacha Khan's philosophy of non-violence and coexistence. In particular, Muslims in the region should take the lead in making available awareness programmes to promote non-violent forms of Islam to challenge the radical version practised by terrorist groups.

## **CONCLUSION**

Drawing upon the life and works of Bacha Khan, this article demonstrates the existence and practise of non-violent interpretations of Islam, and urges that all religions, human beliefs and dignity be respected regardless of differences. 'There is no compulsion in religion' (2: 256); 'Your religion for you, and mine for me' (109: 6) (Mohideen, 2001: 124).

Consequently, Bacha Khan's legacy offers us an excellent tool to mould young minds in a manner such that they understand religion based on their own understanding of humanity and justice, rather than blindly accepting interpretations usually used for political purposes. Although it is very challenging to counter the recent and relatively more radical interpretation of Islam, Bacha Khan's teachings would well serve the need to counter growing religious radicalisation around the globe in Muslim countries.

Nevertheless, it is very crucial for Muslims to stand up against this radicalisation and extremism, and to confront growing hostility towards them around the world. For Bacha Khan, too, preserving non-violent protest was much more important than to Indians because 'the Pathans had been characterized by the British as wild, ungovernable and uncivilized and hence it was doubly important that their protest demonstrate political maturity and fitness for self-rule' (Banerjee, 1999: 192). Consequently, Bacha Khan and his

followers were able to challenge the British stereotype and uphold high moral ground.

Next, the region, and Muslims in particular, must embrace Bacha Khan's vision of non-violence as a means of social and political change. Although leaders like Bacha Khan are either forgotten or have been deliberately suppressed in contemporary narratives, it is time to rehabilitate non-violent history in current educational and political discourse in order to have a sustainable effect on coming generations in creating a peaceful society.



### NOTES

1. 'Pathan' and 'Pashton' refer to the same people.
2. Afghan opposition groups initially rebelled against the government of the pro-Soviet Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) during the late 1970s. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mujahideen>.
3. Afghan Info War. 25 December 2012. 'USA Prints Textbooks to Support Jihad in Afghanistan.' Retrieved 12 May 2013, from Afghan Info War: <http://www.afghaninfowar.com/usa-prints-textbooks-to-support-jihad-in-afghanistan/>.

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