

## Section 13. Philosophy

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### Abdul Ghaffar Khan and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi: The ethical point of view

**Abstract:** The figure of Abdul Ghaffar Khan is analyzed in the light of the similarities between his non-violent ethic and that of Gandhi. Several similarities will be found, but there is a fundamental difference: while Gandhi bases his method on morality, Khan bases it on religion, on the Quran.

**Keywords:** Abdul Ghaffar Khan, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, nonviolence, religion, ethics, Khudai Khidmatgar

#### 1. The figure of Abdul Ghaffar Khan

The figure of Abdul Ghaffar Khan (popularly known as Badshah Khan) is little known in the Western countries, but his relevance in recent history of India and Pakistan has been testified in some biographical studies [3; 4; 5; 6; 13; 14; 19].

During the British rule in India, he played a key role in the structuring of the Pathan freedom movement, the revival of Pathan nationalism and the adoption of nonviolence in the Pathan society. As is known, the North-West Frontier Province played a crucial role not only in the nonviolent claims for independence in India, but also in the geographical re-shaping of the Frontier.

Abdul Ghaffar Khan was born on 1890 at Utmanzai in the Peshawar region from a *Khan* of the Mohammadzai clan. He «came from a remote area of Hashtnagar near Charasadda, from a zone of India that was not even a full-fledged province at the time of his birth, and he was the product of a village school; the highest formal education he ever received was for one year as a day scholar at the Mayo College in Aligarh» [1, P. 22]. He was not a man of letters, ad «in sharp contrast to Gandhi or Nehru or Azad or Patel, he was a man of very large silences. [...] there is no Indian leader of his stature about whom we know so little» [1, P. 22].

From his early age he began to approach nonviolence rejecting the pervasive honor code of his people, the Pathans (or Pashtuns), «one of the most violent peoples of the earth» [20, P. 9]. His proselytism against of the use of force and the obligation to avenge the honor in the blood (the *badai*) pervaded his life. Furthermore, he succeeded in realizing a project that even Gandhi was unable to accomplish: the creation of the first nonviolent army of the story, the *Khudāyī Khidmatgār* — the servants of God — who opposed nonviolently and with dedication and courage to the British colonizers.

However, we must specify that Abdul Ghaffar Khan's nonviolence, although conditioned in the mature period by

the Gandhian message, originated long before he knew the Mahatma and was characterized by a deep knowledge of the Quran and a deep internalization of its message of peace.

In 1910 he decided to serve his people (In the conviction that «Pathans hate compulsion an dictation of any ttype, but their own free will, they are prepared to work in unity and co-operation with others in this country as well as their brethren of the tribal territories, who have so long been kept aloof from us and forced to have a life unworthy of a people») [12 p. 4] and began to set up a method and some institutions that would change the fate of the Frontier. Nonetheless, this method, similarly to that of Gandhi — who believed his «opinions to be not final» [8, P. 5] — has been never really structured because Khan was primarily a man of action rather than contemplation. There are no methodological texts or essays directly related to him. The only testimonies of his struggle come from the interviews of former *Khudāyī Khidmatgār*, or transcriptions of his speeches in Indian National Congress.

#### 2. The centrality of the religious aspect in Badshah Khan

In the study of the figure of Badshah Khan what will be fundamental to remember is the centrality of Islam religion in his thought and in his world view. In particular, some aspects of it were very inspiring to him.

First, «the Quran indicates with very specific dictates the situations in which the use of force is permitted and the rules governing it. The use of the force is an answer, and should never consist of aggression; moreover, the violent practice should not continue longer than the necessary, which means that revenge or rage cannot be allowed under any circumstance» [20, P. 8].

Secondly, moderation and forgiveness were central in the Quran and appeared in the verse 126 of the Surah of the Bees: «if you punish someone, do it to the extent of the damage suffered. If you are patient it will be better for those who were

patient too» [17, P. 241]. It is said that after the revelation of this verse, the prophet Mohammed exploited every opportunity he had to recommend moderation and forgiveness to his comrades and to all the worshippers.

Finally, in the Sunnah of the Messenger, war obeyed (and still obeys) to precise rules. According to the divine prescription, in fact, war was only possible for defensive purposes, but should never tend towards excesses or cruelty. It was considered an exceptional condition to be completed as soon as possible. In this context, also the military actions were governed by a clear ethic code prescribing that prisoners were to be treated with humanity, receive the same treatment of Muslim fighters and should not be subjected to torture in order to extract information. Moreover, houses should not be destroyed, waters polluted, trees cut and the animals killed.

This was the Islam inspiring the political and social action of Badshah Khan. A testimony of love, faith and compassion not only for humanity but also for the other creatures of the world and for the environment.

When he was 20 years old, he opened his first school — the *Dar-ul-Ulum* — at Utamanzai. The first alternative to the British education model. In it, students (mostly farmers) received not only a religious training, but also an education that set them free from illiteracy (learned to read and write) [18, P. 18].

Because of his political activism, after this period, he constantly went in and out of prison. In 1923, when he was released from prison for the umpteenth time, he established the *Pakhtun Jirga* — the Youth League — and launched a new series of activities whose aim were a series of progressive and liberal reforms. One of them was his own magazine, *The Pakhtun*, which challenged the practice preventing woman from actively participating in social life. «He encouraged them to come forward, as already did by the women of his family. His sisters became more and more active in the movement, until 1930, when they were completely free to go around the districts of the Frontier and held speeches [20, P. 107]».

Ghaffar's use of religion and tradition as a means to communicate the new requirements and changes needed was a bridge between the past and the present. It gave new life to religion instead of marginalize it.

However, the most original and interesting contribution produced from Ghaffar to the liberation struggle was the creation, in 1929, of the *Khudāyī Khidmatgār* [11; 15], the first professional nonviolent army in history. Their members were Pathans converted to the nonviolent principles. Dressing a distinctive red shirt, they went through the villages to serve and to support projects of social reconstruction as the opening of new schools, the maintenance of the order, the proselytism against the *badai*.

«One who aspired to become a *Khudāyī Khidmatgār*, declared on solemn oath: "I am a *Khudāyī Khidmatgār*, and as God needs no service I shall serve Him by serving His creatures selflessly. I shall never use violence, I shall not retaliate or take revenge, and I shall forgive anyone who indulges in

oppression and excesses against me. I shall not be a party to any intrigue, family feud and enmity, and I shall treat every *Pakhtun* as my brother and comrade. I shall give up evil customs and practices. I shall lead simple life, do good and refrain from wrong-doing. I shall develop good character and cultivate good habits. I shall not lead any idle life. I shall expect no reward for my services. I shall be fearless and be prepared"» [12, P. 14–15].

A solemn declaration that the Servants of God respected even when the British acted inhumanly as in the occasion of the sit-in held on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1930 at the bazar of *Kissa Khani*, in support of the Salt Satyagraha, where the British ordered troops to open fire with machine guns on the unarmed civilians.

It comes out clear that the religious aspect was the most important characteristic of the ethics of Abdul Ghaffar Khan and of the *Khudāyī Khidmatgār*. «Muslim religious teachings and Ghaffar Khan's re-interpretation of religious values, although springing from what has been perceived as a non-pacifist tradition, provided a clear antidote to violent conflict, encouraged activists to avoid intolerance toward other people, and enabled them to overcome their time-honored inclination to use violence against adversaries, both in interpersonal and intergroup conflicts. Indeed, religious values laid the foundation for encouraging people to choose nonviolence in principle» [10, P. 65].

### 3. Gandhi's thought

The thought of Gandhi relative to *satya* and *ahimsa* was influenced by Hinduism but also by ideas and readings pertaining to several other religions, the Gospel for example.

The starting point was self-analysis, a necessary tool for the man who, tended to the discovery of the *Truth*, first inside himself, and then in relation to others. This is a subjective and therefore partial truth, because the *Absolute Truth* was knowable only to God (which is why Gandhi come to say «Truth is God») [9, P. 70–71] and man would fulfill the moral obligation to «live according to the truth as he can perceive it, and, in doing so use the most pure means of nonviolence» [9, P. 70]. Only after having found this partial *Truth* man would be able to live ethically in Love and Faith.

On the concept of love, Gandhian ethics shows the traces of the influence of Lev Tolstoj's thought. In fact, Tolstoj rejected the classical dualistic conception distinguishing between individual ethics and the ethics of the group, claiming that there was only one ethics, the ethics of love «valid for both individuals and groups, prohibiting any form of violence or coercion and prescribing to undergo the sufferings in his own person whenever this is the only alternative to impose them to others» [2, P. 382]. An idea of pure love negating every kind of pressure or force. This is the reason why Tolstoj's thought did not represent a real alternative to violence.

However, Gandhi, did not give up the political struggle but spoke of *ahimsa*: the absence of the desire to harm, kill, nonviolence, love. «The true *ahimsa* should mean absolute freedom from will, from the wrath, from the hatred, and su-

perabundant love for everything» [7, P. 234–235]. This reading of love and the related nonviolence became the only form of active fight that, to the use of force, opposed moral and mental resistance in the conviction that the patience and the sufferings showed could convince the other of the error of his reasons.

This type of conversion to the good was only plausible only if we believed in two fundamental assumptions: on the one hand, the principle for which the man was born good and could be converted to the good in any moment of his life through acts of sacrifice; and on the other hand, the belief that *ahimsa* means love in the sense St. Paul [16, P. 13, 1–13] gave to the term: a sentiment pervading all the actions done by man.

The instrument to implement this philosophy was the *shatyagraha*, a word formed by *satya* meaning truth and *agraha* meaning firmness. From their composition derived the “true strength”, “firmness in truth”, and “firmness in a good cause”.

#### 4. Conclusion

What clearly comes out from this analysis is that Badshah Khan’s ethics and that of Gandhi are very similar. Both make references to a God, to the unconditioned love for all God’s creatures, to the sacrifice and the service for the others. But there is a fundamental difference: while Gandhi’s method is only influenced by religion and tends to universalism, Khan’s references to religion, and hence to the Quran are much more evident. Maybe because of the education he received, the geographical location, and the people to whom this message was addressed (i. e. the Pathans), the message of Abdul Ghaffar Khan seems to be more anchored to the context of development.

This aspect cannot necessarily be considered a limit, and could be an essential element to encourage the diffusion of the principles of non-violence, tolerance and universal love among the Muslim populations practicing a more radical Islam.

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