

Not Just Another Preacher

In the early years of the previous century, Tagore and Kipling both had mentioned Pakhtun characters in their writings, and both had presented them as the fierce and ferocious men in their emotions and acts¹. Numerous references with negative connotation to the violent and volatile nature of our nation can be found in various other compositions, as well. For instance, as Pyarelal in *Thrown to the Wolves* – his far famed work on the non-violent struggle of Baacha Khan -- has quoted the following from Fielding King-Hall's *Thirty Days of India*,

“One Pathan was sitting on the ground listening intently to a radio broadcasting programme while his neighbor continued to chatter. The first man told the talker to shut up, but the later observed that he had as much right to speak as ‘that loud mouth over there’. The radio fan promptly switched off the human ‘loud speaker’ by sticking a knife into his ribs”²

However, the most interesting accounts of Pakhtuns and Afghans’ natural traits can be found in the declassified secret reports and official correspondences preserved in the India Office Library in UK. We have seen a few glimpses of the same in *Baacha Khan aur Khudaayi Khidmatgaari* of Khan Abdul Wali Khan. One line that he has quoted is particularly interesting and holds relevance even today: it has been taken from a letter dated 10.11.30 by Lord Irvin to the then Secretary of State for India,

“This corner of the earth is as troublesome as it is tiny and occupies a share of my attention and no doubt yours also out of all proportions to it’s size”³

Ten years had passed to the adoption of non violence by Baacha Khan, and twenty to the launching of his movement for the social reform of his people, when this letter was written. Twenty one years from now will complete the century of this correspondence, and this corner of the earth continues to be as troublesome to the outer world, and it still occupies a huge share of world’s attention. The difference, however, is that in those early years the irritating matter for the western colonial rulers of our region was the non violence that our great leader Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan not only advocated and taught to his followers but

¹ Rehmat in Tagore’s *Kabuliwalah* and Mahbub Ali in Kipling’s *Kim*

² Pyarelal, *Thrown To the Wolves – Abdul Ghaffar*: Eastlight Book House, Calcutta, 1966. p27

³ Khan Abdul Wali Khan, *Baacha Khan aur Khudaayi Khidmatgaari (taqseem-e-Hind ya taqseem-e-Musalman)* in Urdu: Baacha Khan Research Center, Peshawar, 2009. p56

personally practiced in the most aggressive manner; while today we are living in conditions where violence has been imposed on us.

The non violent philosophies of passive resistance, pasificism, ahinsa, and most recently the theories of nonkilling by Glenn D Paige – all have more protagonists and preachers and fewer practitioners. The Pakhtun nation is very fortunate that the most enthusiastic practitioner and teacher of non violence was born among them. He came from a very affluent family, but his heart ached for the commoners. He chose to become one of them. He never confined himself to the stage or podium where he could pay only lip service to the cause he wanted his people to stand for. He always reached out to all of his people.

In this context one incident narrated by Khan Abdul Wali Khan in his book Baacha Khan aur Khudaayi Khidmatgaari is particularly moving. At the start of his political career, Wali Khan was made to visit Karak area along with a thousand companions. The weather was hot and they had to go there on foot. The areas chosen for their visit were arenaceous, and it was the month of Ramadan, which means they had to be on the move in hot sands while fasting from early morning till late in the evening. Wali Khan says that he got blisters on his feet on the second day of the journey, and he would walk bare footed on the hot sands as he was unable to wear his shoes because of his blisters. The area was sparsely inhabited, and the villages were situated at long distances. One day, after a long and tiring journey, they reached a tiny village and stopped at a mosque where a charpai was lying close to a tree. Wali Khan writes that exhausted from the journey, he immediately lied down on the charpai. His companion in the journey was a close associate of Baacha Khan. He heard the groans of Wali Khan and told him that he distinctly remembers that once Baacha Khan had also visited the same village in the same weather and under the same conditions, and he had also stopped at the same mosque. Just when he sat down on the charpai, he saw rising smoke on the nearby hill. He asked the imam-e-masjid if there was another village up there. The imam replied in negative and told that there was only one house on the hill where a single man lived. Upon hearing this, Baacha Khan immediately got up and said to his companion that he wanted to go to the man on the hill. The imam tried to assure Baacha Khan that his message would be conveyed to the man when he would come down to attend the Jumma prayers. However, Baacha Khan still went up the hill to meet him saying that he did not want that man to feel neglected⁴. Such was his zeal for the propagation of his philosophy through personal interactions with his people.

In rallies and in protest marches where the authorities would order to bludgeon and baton charge the protestors, he was always there to take the hits. Whenever there was a spate of

⁴ Khan Abdul Wali Khan, pp 177-178

arrests, he would be among first of the arrested. His arrests and incarceration were most humiliating and most painful ever borne by any leader of his stature. During the Quit India Movement, he was beaten hard before he was arrested and taken to Hari Pur Jail from a protest rally. He had received severe injuries; his ribs had been broken⁵. The man, who preached and practiced non violence, was himself subjected to worst forms of violence.

When he was first arrested, he was taken to the jail handcuffed and throughout the period of his confinement, he had fetters. There were no fetters to fit his legs. The pair they had chosen for him had wounded him badly. While they were putting it on him, the portion of his leg above the ankle had bled profusely. He was told that he would get accustomed to it soon⁶. The cell where he was kept stunk. The earthen sanitary pan there was full to the brim with feces. When he was taken there he immediately stepped out and told the officer that the stink was unbearable. The officer pushed him inside and locked the door. Not for a second was he allowed to go out of that cell. Food was pushed through the bars and the cells were guarded to prevent the visitors from communicating with him.⁷ It was his personal examples that motivated his fellow Pakhtuns to make supreme sacrifices for the sake of their land. The events of 23rd April, 1930 are a proof of the selflessness of the Khudayi Khidmatgars. The following extracts from Young India sum up what the Pakhtuns had been subjected to that fateful day:

“A troop of English soldiers reached the spot and without any warning to the crowd began firing into the crowd in which a number of women and children were present. When those in front fell down, those behind came forward with their breast bared and exposed themselves to the fire. Some people got as many as 21 bullet wounds. [Still] all the people stood their ground without getting into panic...An old woman seeing her relatives and friends being wounded came forward [but] was shot and [she] fell wounded An old man with a four years old child on his shoulder unable to brook this brutal slaughter advanced asking the soldier to fire at him. He was taken at his word and he too fell down wounded. The crowd kept standing at the spot facing the soldiers and was fired at from time to time until there was heaps of wounded and dying lying about. The Anglo-Indian paper of Lahore, which represents the official view itself wrote to the effect that the people came forward one after another to face the firing and when they fell wounded they were dragged back and others came forward to be shot at. This state of things continued from 11 to 5’o clock in the evening. When the number of corpses became too many the Ambulance cars of the Government took them away.”⁸

⁵ Farigh Bukhari, *Tehrik-e-aazaadi aur Baacha Khan* in Urdu: Fiction House, Lahore, 1991. p156

⁶ Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, *Zama Zhwand au jidd-o-jihd* in Pashto: Kabul Dolati Matba’, Kabul 1981. p146

⁷ Rajmohan Gandhi, Abdul Ghaffar: The Non Violent Badshah of the Pakhtuns: Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 2004. p62

⁸ Pyarelal, p 17

Eighteen years later and a year after Independence, the same scene was reenacted in Babara where the loyal members of the same organization, protesting the incarceration of the same leader received the same treatment⁹. The women holding Quran close to their chests and above their heads were an addition. However, the shoot orders this time were not given by colonial rulers. The new rulers were following in the footsteps of their colonial masters. They tried their best to conceal the truth and consequently the tragedy of Babara has been lost in history.

Baacha Khan and his followers never hesitated from offering any sacrifice for the sake of liberty and independence. The tragedy, however, is that in response to their selfless efforts and sacrifices they were always placed under more and severer torture. The treatment meted out to them by the new state was evidence that post partition life for the Khudayi Khidmatgars was going to be very tough. The reasons were obvious. Khudayi Khidmatgars were allies of Congress before partition, and therefore, in the new state they were not going to be accepted as loyal citizens despite all their sincere assurances. In a letter written to the author of *Thrown to the Wolves* many years after the independence, Baacha Khan said:

“Considerations of personal harm have never weighted with me. What saddens me is that while we shrank from no sacrifice for the sake of India’s independence, the Congress on attaining it forsook us. They gave themselves upto enjoyment while we were left to suffer alone. We are still dubbed ‘Hindus’. This was unbecoming of the Congress”¹⁰

The plight of his people had compelled him to express his bitterness. This was the utterance of a man whose fear was that the sacrifices of the people who had answered his call and laid down their lives for the cause of Indian independence would go unsung.

One striking characteristic of Baacha Khan was that despite being an affluent and practicing Muslim he never had any elitist and boastful manners that were so visible in some other contemporary Muslim leaders. He never considered religion as dogma that should be used and misused for political purposes. He studied religion and took his lessons from the early days of Islam when Muslims were subjected to worst persecution but they did not resort to armed retaliation. Baacha Khan knew well and also told his people that:

“There are two ways to national progress: one is the path of religion and the other is the road to patriotism. If we are on the road to ruin, it is because we have neither the true spirit

⁹ For details see *Khudayi Khidmatgar Salar Karim Dad* in Pashto by Salar Abdul Karim: Zia Sons Printers, Peshawar, 2006. pp82-88

¹⁰ Pyarelal, p76

of religion, nor the true spirit of patriotism, of love for our nation, nor have we developed any social consciousness.”¹¹

While the majority of the non congressional Muslim leaders were implicitly or explicitly emphasizing communal differences culminating into violence, Baacha Khan was vigorously trying to enable his people to get hold of their long forgotten divine weapon – patience. His message to his people was:

“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 (Peace be upon him), but you are not aware of it. That weapon is patience and righteousness. No power on earth can stand against it. When you go back to your villages, tell your brethren that there is an army of God and its weapon is patience. Endure all hardships. If you exercise patience, victory will be yours.”¹²

This is one message that needs to be spread in every nook and corner of the world. The duteous ones will surely take it.

¹¹ S.R. Bakhshi, *Abdul Ghaffar Khan – The Frontier Gandhi*: Anmol Publications, New Delhi, 1992. pp122-123

¹² Eknath Easwaran, *A Man To Match His Mountain: Badshah Khan, Non Violent Soldier of Islam*: Nilgiri Press, California, 2nd Ed. 1985. p117