

Structure, chance and choice for Abdul Ghaffar Khan and the Khudai Khidmatgars

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Abdul Ghaffar Khan (1890-1988) and the Khudai Khidmatgars (KKs) are an excellent example of the role of structure, chance and choice in shaping nonviolent religious militancy. The KKs (“Servants of God”) were a highly disciplined nonviolent army of at their peak 100,000 Pakhtuns who in 1930-46 fought British imperial rule in the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) of what is today Pakistan.

Structure of Pakhtun society

Geographic structure

Pakhtuns (also known as Pathans and Pashtoons) hail from the NWFP and Eastern Afghanistan. The geography of the border between these two areas is renowned for its rugged mountains, rocky crags, and series of mountain passes, the most famous of which is the Khyber Pass. This influenced Pakhtun society in at least two important ways.

First, it induced fragmentation among Pakhtuns, splitting them into two groups: those occupying the mountainous area, known as tribals, and those living in the fertile plains. Tribals have distinct tribal identities; there are 15 major tribes, which include Afridis, Shinwaris, Mullagoris, Shalmanis, Mohmands, Wazirs, Mahsuds, and Urmars (Hussain 2000: 8-17). The tribal areas have never been under the full control of anyone except tribal Pukhtuns, even during British colonial rule. Their living conditions were (and still are) very different to Pakhtuns in the plains. Even today, the literacy rate among tribal women is less than

one percent. Some tribes had a reputation for plundering travelers or those in the plains. Pakhtuns in the plains led more settled lives based around agriculture and town life, and had greater access to socioeconomic opportunities; tribal identity was less significant.

Second, the Khyber Pass has long been the primary route for invaders and travelers to enter into the Indian subcontinent from central Asia, and it hence it was an important strategic area militarily for whoever ruled India. Colonial rule was more repressive in the NWFP compared to the rest of India—the British did not want to see educated, organized, and unified Pakhtuns. The British were particularly concerned to keep the crown jewel of their empire out of Russian hands, and they therefore used the NWFP as a buffer zone against the Russians, particularly the tribal areas (Easwaran 2000). The British attempted divide and rule tactics to coerce and bribe tribes into submission with mixed success. They were more effective in banning Pakhtuns in the plains from cooperating with tribals politically. For instance, when Khan began organizing Pakhtuns socially, building schools and making his people politically aware, he was banned by the British from visiting the tribal areas, and was forced to sneak in.

Socioeconomic, political, religious and cultural structure

The Pakhtuns have long had a burning desire for freedom, and have a renowned history of fighting using handmade guns, daggers, and

at times outrageous cunning. Britain lost a lot of its finest soldiers on the area's rocky crags; her soldiers called the area simply "the grim". The British dealt with the Pakhtuns ruthlessly, including bombing villages from the air (Easwaran 2000).

At the turn of the last century Pakhtun society was colonized, stagnant, and violent, worn down by feuds, inequalities, factionalism, poor social cooperation, and plain ignorance (Taizi 2002, Banerjee 2001). Education opportunities were strictly limited. Pakhtuns are Muslim; Mullahs were known to have told parents that if their children went to school, they would go to hell. Khan stated that "the real purpose of this propaganda" was to keep Pakhtuns "illiterate and uneducated", and hence his people "were the most backward in India" with regard to education (ibid. 1969: 12). He also stated that by the time Islam reached his people centuries earlier, it had lost much of its original spiritual message (ibid. 1969: 17).

Pakhtun's ancient code of honor, ethics and revenge, *Pukhtunwali*, was struggling in the face of British colonial rule which had distorted traditional political, economic and cultural processes. The British had helped create a landlord class that acted as indirect rulers, hastening the decline of traditional Pakhtun land redistribution practices. Indirect rule was so effective that many rural Pakhtuns did not realize they were being ruled by the British. The imposition of landlordism over Pakhtun's tribal society living in *ferae naturae* was regressive, resulting in a situation "in which a family needs men and wealth to defend its properties and keep up its honour, prestige, pride, status and position against neighbouring contenders. The feudal lords heading these families are forced by circumstance to enter into a rivalry for narcissism, vanity, glory and superiority. Impoverished tenants provide all kinds of menial services to them and are also required to produce wealth and manpower to raise and magnify the status of their

respective lords" (Taizi 2002). The British also manipulated the *jirga* system of justice to their own ends. "The Pathans were in no position to offer concerted resistance to the British" (Banerjee 2001: 45).

Chance

As Taizi observes, Abdul Ghaffar Khan was a product of his society. Khan was son of a landlord, and was expected to become one himself. Taizi adds "Leaders normally stand out on the pedestal of their society. Those leaders are seldom born who raise their society from the ignominious depths of ignorance and obscurity to the heights of enlightenment and glory. Abdul Ghaffar Khan was one of this rare breed of leaders. He blew new life in the dormant people heretofore groaning under the burden of the worst type of feudalism."

What chance events made Khan undertake his extraordinary life mission—serving his people for an incredible 80 years—which while not predictable, were possible within the structure of his society? Khan himself tells us. First, when about to join one of the most prestigious military regiments in all of India, he observed a friend being insulted by an English lieutenant because his haircut was too much like an Englishman's. On that day he "gave up the idea of joining the Army or seeking any employment with the British" (ibid. 1969: 20-21). Second, he was set to study in England, arranged by his brother and father, but his mother refused her consent to let him go (ibid. 1969: 22). Third, Khan was educated by missionaries in a mission school in which he learned a "surging love" for his country, in contrast to his friends who went to other schools. "A pupil is bound to be influenced by his teachers, and it was the example of my teachers that inspired in me the desire to serve God and humanity." In a good example of two chance events combining he adds, "I would have loved to have gone to

England and study among the devoted and sincere people like them. But as my mother would not give me permission to go, I had to give up the idea, and it was then that I vowed to dedicate my life to the service of God and humanity” (ibid.1969: 28-29).

One chance event that influenced Khan's life's mission was tragic. While in Jerusalem in 1926 after Haj, Khan's wife died after accidentally falling down a flight of stairs. He said “Losing my life's companion so suddenly was a terrible shock to me. I never married again, though I was still a young man. I decided that there would be no room for another marriage in my life of dedication to the service of my country” (Khan 1969: 86).

In 1928 chance twice played an important role in introducing Khan to Gandhi and the Congress party. First, he met Gandhi and Nehru for the first time after a letter of introduction from his brother Dr. Khan Saheb, who had studied with Nehru in England and was “very friendly with him” (Khan 1969: 91). Second, later that year Khan attended a Khalifat Conference in Calcutta, where a serious fight broke out between influential leader Mohammed Ali and a couple of Punjabi leaders while Khan was on a platform with them. A knife was waved about by one of the Punjabis, and pandemonium quickly ensued that was averted only when Khan and “a large number of Pathans” managed to stop the fighting (Khan 1969: 99). At the same conference, Ali used his presidential address to rudely criticize Hindu society, their traditions, and their customs. Disappointed at such unbecoming behavior from a leader, Khan left the conference to attend his first Congress meeting, which by coincidence was also being held in Calcutta. There he witnessed Gandhi handle the continual heckling of a “conceited young man” with good humor, patience, and self-control, and Khan says this “made a deep impression on me”. He and a few other Pathans told

Mohammed Ali about the incident, urging him to adopt Gandhi's self-control, but Ali did not react as Khan hoped he would—he “became very annoyed” and said to Khan “And who do you think you are, you Pathans from the back of beyond, to come and tell me how to behave?” (Khan 1969: 99-100). Given the reputation of Pakhtuns across India for backwardness and violence, this was undoubtedly a stinging insult. Khan was “very disappointed and hurt” and quit the conference (Khan 1969: 100).

The events of 1928 no doubt facilitated the coming together of the KKs and Congress within the structure of British oppression, whose violence forced the KKs to adopt an openly political stance. In December 1929, the year of the founding of the KKs, Khan attended a Congress session in Lahore along with many others from the NWFP, beginning a strong relationship between Congress and the KKs, not to mention between Gandhi and Khan.

Choice

The decision of the KKs to adopt religious nonviolent militancy in the face of imperial power instead of violent resistance was one of choice. They wanted to put an end to factions, feuds and social evils which “were rife among the Pathans”, including one of their worst characteristics, the habit of taking revenge. Pakhtuns “badly needed to change their anti-social customs, to check their violent outbursts, and to practise good behaviour,” said Khan, and “this is what we thought the *Khudai Khidmatgar* movement would do” (Khan 1969: 96-97). Furthermore, the British were in an overwhelmingly superior military position.

While nonviolence was a notable choice for a people steeped in violent resistance, of arguably greater interest is their so far unique mechanism for adopting nonviolence—a nonviolent army complete with uniform, rank, and training regimes. “Khan sought to

bolster the personal belief in non-violence through the unthinking discipline and obedience of mechanical military drilling, which was very different from the more individualistic Gandhian approach to teaching and acquiring non-violence. The KK was organised around a strict hierarchy of military ranks and titles, each of which commanded a certain number of sub-units and men. . . . Khan established an explicit chain of command and instilled strict discipline” (Banerjee 2001: 84). The Kks used to march and manoeuvre on parades, including using a bugle that sounded like a British army bugle (Banerjee 2001: 85).

The KK uniform was red and included a Sam Browne belt; “The technique of non-violent confrontation was the very opposite of guerrilla campaigns and in place of the Pathan's traditional use of stealth and camouflage the KK was a determinedly extrovert and highly visible presence” (Banerjee 2001: 87). Banerjee notes that her “informants said that they always wanted to be seen in uniform, and this is confirmed by reports which record that the Kks were even seen wearing their uniforms to the mosque, at the festival of Id, and when it was traditional to dress in new clothes”(Banerjee 2001: 88). She adds that this was due not only to pride in taking part in the Kks, but it also seems that “in a society which traditionally attached great value to egalitarianism, but had been experiencing growing inequality and class divides, the uniforms restored some measure of equality between rich and poor.” Furthermore, although rank was marked on the shoulders, “this gave no clue to social status, since the KK army—unlike the British—rank was deliberately dissociated from social position and status, with Badshah Khan encouraging several methods of 'positive discrimination' to ensure the poor were well represented among the officers” (Banerjee 2001: 88).

Typical KK training camps lasted one week. Continuing the themes of discipline and service, activities included drills, physical fitness training, village cleaning, political education, spinning, grinding wheat, political-cultural performances, and speeches from senior members including Khan (Banerjee 2001: 75-76) The camps were often large; some camps had 800 participants.

Conclusion

The structure of Pakhtun society overlaid and influenced by British colonial rule provided the framework for choices made by Khan to form the Kks and for a substantial number of Pakhtuns to join his movement. These choices addressed structural problems identified by Khan, and given his movement's so far unique historical stature, reflect the depth of insight he had into his people's condition and potential. Khan was himself influenced by a series of chance events, which were unpredictable and yet also unsurprising. These events facilitated and guided his trajectory in what became an extraordinary and remarkable life as leader of his people.

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