**The forgotten philosophy of Bacha Khan**

Bacha Khan whose real name was Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan was a Pashtun nationalist leader, who was born in the Utmanzai village of Charsadda, North-West Frontier Province, the present day Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, in 1890. His father Behram Khan was a well-to-do landowner of his village. Bacha Khan was sent to the local mosque where he learned to read the Holy Quran. For his early education he was sent to the Edward Memorial Mission School, Peshawar. However, he left his matriculation incomplete as he wanted to join the army, but he was unsuccessful in his goal.

After that, Bacha Khan decided to work for the welfare of the people of his area, and he opened a school at Utmanzai realising early in his life that development was impossible without education. In 1921, he set up the Anjuman-e-Islah-e-Afghan (Society for the Reformation of Afghans) to rid the Pakhtuns of illiteracy and social evils. Thereafter, a network of about 70 Azad Islamia madarassas were established throughout the province to promote education, Pashtu language, literature, patriotism and true love for Islam. Being a great promoter of education he opened many schools. During the Khilafat Movement he joined the Hijrat movement and migrated to Afghanistan.

Bacha Khan established the organisation Khudai Khidmatgars (Servants of God), also known as Red Shirts. They were pro-Congress and worked hard for a united ‘Pakhtunistan’. Initially, it was a social organisation but later it turned into a political party. This movement was very significant because it was deeply rooted in the ideology of non-violence. Pashtuns are strong adherents of their traditional way of life known as Pashtunwali. The centuries-old Pashtunwali is a social code of Pashtuns in which revenge and conflict are almost a way of life. And therefore, it was very   
tough for Bacha Khan to teach the philosophy of non-violence to the warrior Pashtuns.

Bacha Khan’s philosophy of non-violence was deeply religious and in the light of the Holy Quran and Sunnah. He was also famous by the name “Frontier Gandhi” due to his philosophy of non-violence. Like Gandhi, Bacha Khan focused not only on gaining independence from the British but also the transformation of the self. As Gandhi advocated Satyagraha (insistence on truth), Bacha Khan advocated a radical transformation of the Pakhtuns as peaceful, forward-looking people. He was very active against the British Raj, and he had organised a group of 100,000 nonviolent soldiers; he was fighting for freedom of India, as he believed that hate begets hate. But he was fighting nonviolently. He believed that education was the only way forward for the betterment of his people.

One wonders why a great leader like Bacha Khan is conspicuously absent from most Pakistani history books or, worse, is referred to in passing. He is rarely mentioned in Pakistan’s media. There are some reasons why Bacha Khan and his philosophy do not fit the narrative of Pakistani state. Firstly, his revolutionary ideals were stifled in the evolution of Pakistan simply because his ideas did not ‘fit’ in the meta-narrative that did not allow any deviation from the line of the Muslim League. Secondly, as his brother, famously known as Dr Khan Sahib, was pro-Congress and was against the Pakistan movement, Bacha Khan also followed the same ideology, and rejected Muslim League’s struggle for Pakistan. He wanted to make a separate state for his own people. Bacha Khan’s opposition to the Pakistan movement was based on his political principles. After the establishment of Pakistan, he had a cordial meeting with Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah.

The Awami National Party (ANP), which is now being run by his grandson Asfandyar Wali Khan, is one example of Bacha Khan’s principles. There are many people in Pakistan, especially in Punjab, who raise criticism why there is an airport and a university in the name of Bacha Khan, a person who was buried in Afghanistan. If there is any logic in that argument one wonders why Pakistan named her missiles Ghaznavi, Ghori and Babar; those warriors were not from the region now known as Pakistan but had come from Central Asia and Afghanistan.

For a number of years we have been facing the evil of terrorism and extremism, but the teachings of Bacha Khan remain a bulwark against extremist tendencies in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and other parts of the country. Pashtuns have suffered the most at the hands of terrorism and extremism in Pakistan. The one great hope against this tendency is the ideology of the Khudhai Khidmatgars and the non-violent philosophy of the Frontier Gandhi. Let his struggles serve as a reminder that one doesn’t need to be violent in order to bring about change, for change can be possible through peaceful means as well.

**Why Bacha Khan matters today – I**

For Walter Benjamin, the great German philosopher, history was alive in the now – the everyday of this age. The past according to him is incomplete. In fact, he goes so far as to argue that it is a revolutionary duty to liberate the past. This can be done only by fulfilling the objectives and the dreams of yesterday. The past has to be laid to rest, to put it another way.

In such a view, the past is not a mere collection of tales to draw lessons from – or worse – to magnify for conservative nostalgia or for imposing an exclusionary identity on us. In other words, this rules out narrow nationalism of any kind or religious fundamentalist revivalism.

If we apply that idea as we look back at our own story, i.e. the past of the South Asian Subcontinent, is it possible to trace some projects or find political figures which can be resurrected today – to complement the present and to move towards a more liberated future for us all?

Unfortunately, given the lopsided and linear view of history that is imposed by the state and its established cultural institutions (as well as the academia), it often happens that influential and significant figures who not only transformed their local settings but also dreamt of an alternative, progressive future are erased. This bleak state-sponsored vision of history instils and encourages alienation from our own past and culture and transports us to a rootless and totally concocted version of the past.

But against this vision, we can also offer another version of history, which is truer to our roots. And it also connects our roots to a universal project of emancipation for all humankind. Such figures and projects can be dug out from the ruins of our past.

Abdul Ghaffar Khan, popularly known as Bacha Khan, and his movement of social reform and political transformation, known as the Khudai Khidmatgar Tehreek (literal meaning: “Movement of the Servants of God”) are, perhaps, the best candidate for this.

Bacha Khan was a social reformer and a politician active in what was then the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) under the British Raj and then subsequently under Pakistan. He was an ally of the All India Congress and in Pakistan’s official historiography he is much maligned for his pre-Partition politics.

But Bacha Khan was much more than a politician. He was leader of a complex movement. The imagery and metaphors of the movement were Islamic, and its framework was meant to be harmonious with the fascination that the masses usually have for religious imagery (even in today’s setting). And yet, the political vision was secular and progressive and its objective was social reform and political emancipation. The movement was defined as,

“Khuday ta da khidmat hajat nishta. Da hagha da makhluq khidmat kawal da haga khidmat dy,”

(God is in no need of being served. Serving His creature is a service to Him.”)

Famously he also said about the organizational structure and the spirit of the movement,

“Da khuday pa khidmat ke ikhtilaf nishta. Itkhtilaf da khudgharzai na paida kegy,”

(“The Service of God does not create differences. Differences are born from self-interest.”)

Such statements are best read in terms of the concept of Wahdat-ul-Wajood (Unity of all Existence), the most popular Sufi mystical tradition of the Subcontinent. Bacha Khan was a close follower of the 17th-century Bayazid Ansari, popularly known as Peer-e-Rokhan, who had his own school of Sufi Islam and fought the Mughal Empire for autonomy of the Pashtun lands.

The Khudai Khidmatgar Tehreek was preceded by Tehreek-e-Islah-e-Afghana (Movement for Reform of Afghans). That movement was limited in scale but defined the direction that the Khudai Khidmatgars would go on to take. After seeing the waste of resources at lavish weddings, Bacha Khan would travel to each village and would lecture people on the virtues of simplicity. He also urged people to channel their resources towards economic activities rather than wasting on a day or two of celebrations. Later, the Khudai Khidmatgar Tehreek would make people swear a pledge that they would spend at-least two hours doing some civic service free of cost – be that cleaning the streets, offering some help to the poor or lending a helping hand in the fields.

Bacha Khan was fiercely anti-colonial. His movement was subjected to harrowing brutality at the hands of the British Empire. The Qissa Khwani massacre, also discussed before on these pages, stands as a memory no less excruciating than the Jalianwala Bagh massacre but it is in the backwaters of the history of the Indian independence movement – because it happened in as fringe a locality as Peshawar under the British Raj. In response to the challenge of colonial modernity, Bacha Khan sought to find answers by rooting himself in a historical identity of resistance and solidarity of his people with the wider Indian nationalist and anti-colonial struggles through affiliation with the All India National Congress.

Bacha Khan’s anti-colonialism was all about finding a local response to colonial modernity which was not based on a sense of inferiority – and it is something that eminent 19th-century Muslim thinker Jamaluddin Afghani would have gladly approved of!

As if tracing the footsteps of Jamaluddin Afghani, Bacha Khan saw a moral community based on a shared history and culture –inspired by certain spiritual traditions. But unlike the revisionists and revivalists, he didn’t cling to a romanticized or a glorified vision of those traditions. In-fact they were criticized and, as mentioned earlier, the first step he took in the realm of social activism was to reform some cultural traditions. He also founded Azaad Madrassah, a school for modern education – later transformed into a chain of schools. That initiative faced stiff resistance from the local clergy and he faced many hostile Fatwas. He mentions in his autobiography how a mullah in the early 1920s came to the groundbreaking ceremony of a new school in a nearby village with sword in one hand and a Quran in the other and challenged him to ‘Jihad’ if he thought that he was right in opening a school! Bacha Khan, cool by temperament, replied that the first word of revelation was the command “Iqra” (Read!) So if the whole Quran is a continuation of the first injunction to read, how can a place devoted to reading and learning possibly be un-Islamic?

The outlook, the program, the spirit and the matter of Bacha Khan’s movement was secular and progressive in nature but in order to make it palatable he didn’t use borrowed terms and concepts which would have sounded alien in the historical setting of his time. The kind of social progress imagined was also complemented by a practical and immediate political goal of freedom from British imperialism. In that sense, this was not a conservative movement for reform of society by relying on puritanism and revisionism. Instead the language of religion was employed to appeal for a progressive social transformation and a radical political demand for freedom.

Bacha Khan’s understanding of religion was not the one which the fundamentalists employed at that time. His understanding of religion was that of a complex phenomenon which gave meaning and a sense of social cohesion to people and he employed that language to both reform the society and the religion itself. The “Wahdat-ul-Wajood” of Pir-e-Rokhan guided him rather than the rootless asceticism that religion has now come to be synonymous with.

Bacha Khan was borrowing the imagery, vocabulary and content of spiritual and cultural traditions at a time when the same kind of Islam was used for completely different purposes. By comparison, the All India Muslim League drew upon a different understanding of the role of Islam – as an argument for Muslim exclusiveness and thus for creating a separate homeland for that community. Meanwhile, Bacha Khan rallied the masses for a secular future by deploying the evocative grammar of religion itself. A future community was to be formed on the basis of equality guaranteed by a modern constitution but a social transformation had to happen by reforming the religion.

To draw upon this memory of resistance, as Bacha Khan himself did, would be vital to any project for democracy, human dignity and freedom today.

**Why Bacha Khan matters today – II**

Political action based on non-violence has to be the most important legacy of Bacha Khan. To understand why this emphasis on non-violence was so crucial, it is important to understand how the British Empire related to Pashtuns.

British colonialism can be said to have “produced” the Pashtuns – both epistemologically and politically – as a bunch of violent, albeit noble savages. This also led the British to categorize Pashtuns as one of the martial races and to recruit from among them for the British Indian Army. Their language was declared a “vernacular”, unfit for official purposes and deemed unworthy of cultural production.

The violent imagery which the British evoked around the Pashtuns was thus meant for their own colonial administrative purposes – and also to keep the spirit of revolt in check by brutally suppressing any political activity. And so, Pashtuns were made to come to the terms with colonial modernity through a self-image of violence and barbarism.

But that colonial image was disrupted by Bacha Khan. He did this by creating a non-violent “army” which used titles like “Salaar” (commander), but the entry to which was an oath of non-violence – both in personal life and in political action!

Bacha Khan would famously say that the only Pashtun that the British know is a violent Pashtun. He argued that the British knew precisely how to deal with such a Pashtun. But they did not know how to deal with a non-violent one because they hadn’t seen one! By throwing the moral self of the oppressors (i.e. the colonizers) into tension and stripping them of any moral authority, by using the human body as a line of defense against the butts of guns and bullets, the colonial arsenal of violence stood impotent against a mass of freedom-fighters. The state, and more so the colonial-imperial one, was well-versed in violence and had a virtually inexhaustible capacity for violence. Bacha Khan, in the vein of all non-violent struggles, correctly diagnosed that on a violent turf there can be no competition with the colonizers. A violent reaction against the state only gives moral legitimacy to the violence of the state and, rather than achieving a long-term political transformation, works as a momentary venting out of frustration. He would also argue that non-violence is an act of courage because keeping your reaction in check is to conquer yourself. This also was necessary to purge the body-politic and self-image of Pashtuns from notions of violence. A political transformation was neatly tied to a spiritual transformation through the philosophy of non-violence.

Bacha Khan had a way of connecting the local-particular with the global-universal. He was not consumed by an undue pride in local culture and didn’t want an isolationist solution to political and social issues

But this non-violence was not passive. It was not an isolationist and quietist project of conformism. It was deeply political and subversive both of the political oppression and of the epistemological violence of the imperial-colonial state – and its post-colonial successor.

Bacha Khan’s politics was an adequate response to his times. He was a believer in the continuity of a memory of resistance and had faith in the moral cohesion of society through its traditional values – and yet he was also was a reformer of those very traditions. In short, he was a modernizer while being rooted in his own sociocultural background.

His project, unfortunately, was not to be fulfilled because the violence of the post-colonial state was such that even the commitment and willpower of Bacha Khan proved insufficient to totally overcome it. Or perhaps, that could never possibly be accomplished within his epoch. As Walter Benjamin has showed, the current epoch is dreamt by the last one. And in the current epoch, the dreams of the previous one have to be recalled to lay them finally to rest.

Political action based on non-violence defined at least 60 years of Bacha Khan’s political struggle. In those 60 years he saw the worst of massacres, both in Qissa Khwani Bazaar (in the colonial era) and Babarra (after Pakistan’s independence) and many more in other places. He spent 35 years of his life in prison yet he neither abandoned the political struggle nor succumbed to the lure of violence.

British colonial policy relied on the image of a ‘violent’ Pakhtun – a fact which was crucial to Bacha Khan’s strategy

Some would argue that so much suffering and not getting what he intended was a failure of non-violence. But that is a misreading of the later part of his struggle i.e. equal political rights and civil rights within the framework of independent Pakistan. The important thing about civil rights is that any discrimination – unless it is mandated by a constitution or law as with the slavery in the US and apartheid in South Africa – is a result of political structures of governance underlying the policy and ideology of the state, which can’t be easily displaced and eradicated. But Bacha Khan through his political struggle and social reform opened a rupture in the neat linear narrative of the British Empire – one which the state wasn’t able to stitch up through measures of co-optation or of brutal suppression. In one way the present continuity of a political movement for equality and for a strong federation are the echoes of his struggle.

Another way in which Bacha Khan’s non-violence is relevant is that it has to be tied today with direct political action and not as a passive tribute to an era bygone or invoking his name only to gain political sympathy. Bacha Khan would say that a people which has a hunger for power can’t have democracy. Read ‘power’ here as a desire to rule others for self-aggrandizement.

Regarding the question of the place of women in a society, Bacha Khan famously said, “If you want to see the level of progress of a society, see how it treats women.” The Azad Madrassas (schools) were open to both boys and girls in a deeply conservative setting. Gender equality in Pakistan seems a far-fetched dream but Bacha Khan took the very first steps – in a marginalized region which was characterized as a land of violent barbarians by the ruling elites. He had a clear emphasis on education and equality for girls and the political emancipation of women.

Religion, being part of the socio-cultural reality, isn’t always reduced to the margins where theological debates occur. In our times, there is a fervent debate about fundamentalist interpretations of Islam. Claims of “religious sentiments being hurt” are often used as a tool to silence critics and weaponize public sentiment – all in an effort to suppress dissent and dissuade alternative perspectives. It is important to truly detect the direction that religious discourse is taking. Perhaps, in this time it may not even be possible to cite the ideals and semantics of religion for a secular and progressive future because the mood of mainstream politics has co-opted a fundamentalist variety of religion for vested interests. But it is possible to open alternative avenues of debate and thus alternative imaginings of a future based on egalitarian and tolerant interpretations of Islam.

We know it can be done, because Bacha Khan did it.

Lastly, Bacha Khan had a way of connecting the local-particular with the global-universal. He was not consumed by an undue pride in local culture and didn’t want an isolationist solution to political and social issues. He connected that struggle with a wider progressive struggle, the terms of which were never nostalgic and exclusionary. Realizing his struggle for a participatory, tolerant and equal future for all would be a way to liberate us from the current dystopia we find ourselves in.

Walter Benjamin said, “If they are successful even our dead in their graves will not be safe.” He was referring to the fascists and authoritarian extremists of his era, in the 1930s.

If they are successful, not only we will live in a horrible reality, but our memories of resistance will also be taken away, and thus we will be floating around as rootless, groundless specks.