

A MUSLIM GANDHI?

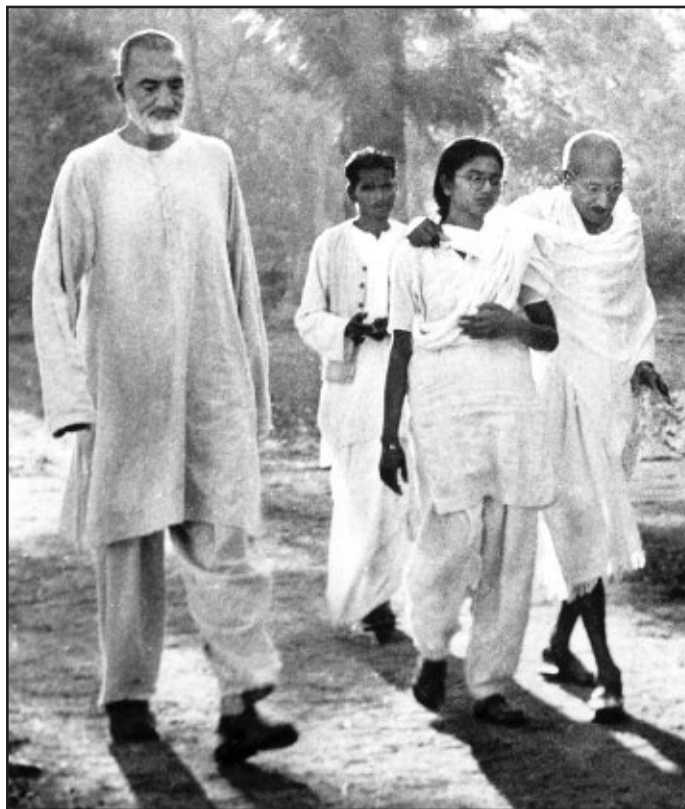
Badshah Khan and the World's First Nonviolent Army

Tim Flinders, Guest Contributor

This year marks the 75th anniversary of an unprecedented yet almost entirely unknown event in the history of nonviolent resistance. In the main square of the city of Peshawar, in modern day Pakistan, several hundred nonviolent Pashtun resisters were shot and killed by British-led troops as they peacefully protested the arrest of their leader, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, known as Badshah Khan to his followers, and later known in India as “the Frontier Gandhi.”

That they were gathered peacefully in the first place, unarmed, is astonishing in itself since these were Muslim Pashtun from the Northwest Frontier Province of India, members of one of the most violent tribal societies in the world. Khan had persuaded them to lay down their guns and knives and become members of his nonviolent army, the Khudai Khidmatgars, “Servants of God,” and join Gandhi’s civil disobedience movement against British rule.

Badshah Khan was born in 1890, a member of a wealthy and aristocratic Muslim family. Educated and inspired by British missionaries, he began opening schools among the



Khan with Gandhi on an evening walk. (J. V. Metha)

impoverished and mostly illiterate Pashtun villagers of the Frontier Province while still in his early twenties. In 1919, he led demonstrations against British rule and was imprisoned for three years in unusually harsh conditions that almost broke his health. Undeterred,

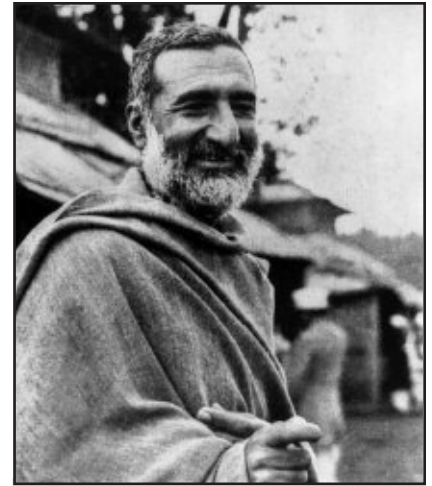
he continued devoting himself to education and reform work among the Pashtun, and claimed to have visited all 1000 villages over a period of about ten years.

Khan was a devout Muslim who claimed to draw his nonviolence directly from Islam. “There is nothing surprising in a Muslim or a Pashtun like me subscribing to the creed of nonviolence,” he wrote. “It is not a new creed. It was followed fourteen hundred years ago by the Prophet all the time he was in Mecca, but we had so far forgotten it that when Gandhi placed it before us, we thought he was sponsoring a novel creed.”

In the late Twenties, after a long period of fasting and meditation, Khan came up with the idea of a “nonviolent army” of Pashtun tribesmen who would renounce violence and the code of revenge deeply embedded in Pashtun society. They wore red military uniforms (and were called “Red Shirts”), took an oath forswearing violence, retaliation and revenge, formed regiments, trained and drilled, and devoted themselves to village uplift, education and reform. When Gandhi declared Indian Independence in 1930, he ignited a massive civil disobedience movement across India in which thousands were jailed, beaten and some killed.

On the remote Northwest Frontier, the repression was far worse. The British regarded the Pashtun tribes as savages. They sealed the borders to the province and unleashed a campaign of violent repression unmatched during the civil disobedience movement. “Red Shirts” were publicly stripped and beaten (shades of Abu Ghraib), their property confiscated, their crops burnt. Through it all, they remained nonviolent. Some Khudai Khidmatgars chose suicide rather than allow themselves to be publicly humiliated. But repression only gathered more recruits to the cause. At its height, Khan’s Khudai Khidmatgars numbered more than 80,000.

On April 23rd, 1930, the British arrested Khan and a mass demonstration filled the main square of Peshawar to protest his arrest. In a moment of panic, British-led troops began firing into the crowd. In his study of nonviolence



Badshah Khan (D. G. Tendulkar)



The Khudai Khidmatgars ("servants of God"): the world's first nonviolent army.

photos courtesy Nilgiri Press

Gene Sharp, formerly of Harvard University's Center for International Affairs, describes the scene: "When those in front fell down wounded by the shots, those behind came forward with their breasts bared and exposed themselves to the fire one after another, and when they fell wounded they were dragged back and others came forward to be shot at. This state of things continued from 11 till 5 o'clock in the evening." An estimated two to three hundred Pashtun were killed. One regiment of soldiers refused to fire on the unarmed Pashtun and were court-martial and sentenced to long prison terms.

But Khan's nonviolent Pashtun army remained nonviolent. Even Gandhi found it remarkable: "That such men who would have killed a human being with no more thought than they would kill a chicken or hen should at the bidding of one man (Khan) have laid down their arms and accepted nonviolence as the superior weapon sounds almost like a fairy tale."

When a truce was signed two years later, Indians were given the right to elect their own provincial governments for the first time. Khan's brother, Dr. Khan Saheb became the first prime minister of the Northwest Frontier Province. Badshah Khan himself remained apolitical, choosing to focus on village reform. He became a close confidante of Gandhi's and can be seen in many photos, the 6 foot 4 Khan towering over the diminutive Mahatma.

In his biography of Badshah Khan, *Nonviolent Soldier of Islam* (Nilgiri Press, 1995), Eknath Easwaran writes: "Badshah Khan based his life and work on the profound principle of nonviolence, raising an army of courageous men and women who translated it into action. Were his example better known, the world might come to recognize that the highest religious values of Islam are deeply compatible with a nonviolence that has the power to resolve conflicts even against heavy odds."

India received its independence in 1947, and Khan's province became part of Pakistan. His close ties to Gandhi and the Indian Congress Party aroused suspicions and his movement was suppressed. Khan himself served another fifteen years in prison for protesting various military dictatorships. In 1962 he became Amnesty International's first "Prisoner of the Year" and was the first non-Indian to receive the Bharat Ratna, India's highest civilian honor. In 1985 he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize and died at home near Peshawar in 1988, at the age of 98, having served thirty years in prison.

Tim Flinders' writings on nonviolence can be found in [Gandhi the Man](#) and [Nonviolent Soldier of Islam](#). (Visit www.nilgiri.org for info on these books.) He has recently completed a screenplay on the life of Badshah Khan.