

Unarmed Pathans

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There are good reasons why civilizations need to remember and celebrate their history, even when it is made by insignificant subalterns or away from the centres of power. Any reluctance to incorporate these smaller and sometimes divergent movements into the nationalist historiography can create a picture of the nation that is uni-dimensional, rigid and eroded of its rich cultural archive. Yet, when the unexpected happens and the country is laid to siege by forces beyond the control of individual people, it is precisely these historical resources that allow for new and energetic responses to the current predicaments.

In Pakistan, the example of the now largely forgotten *Khudai khidmatgar* movement, which flourished in the NWFP from 1930 until 1947, is a case in point. The *Khudai khidmatgar* movement was a largely Pashtun (Pathan) movement which was guided by a whole new ideology made up by combining elements of its existing culture. Thus, this anti-colonial movement was inspired by suras from the Q'uran in facing the colonial oppression with patience and non-violence, its members drew on their manly Pashtun virtues of honour and courage to face the enemy armies unarmed and it re-surrected a Pashtun identity which was last in evidence in the revolt against the Mughal Empire. It is salutary to remind ourselves today when the mention of words 'Pathan' or 'NWFP' immediately conjures images of fanaticism and violence, that in the same villages and mountains of the Frontier, only a few decades ago, the most successful demonstration of political protest through civil disobedience was in full flow. Then, like today, the enemy was as much imperial as it was internal and it managed to bring them both to their knees. As a critique of the governmental neglect of basic welfare programmes in education, sanitation and health, Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan and his colleagues, started a movement of self-reform which included cleanliness drives in every village, the setting up Azad schools which delivered primary education and the picketing of liquor shops. In all of these, the top leadership of the movement led by example. Badshah Khan's own sons studied in Azad schools, he walked for miles everyday visiting people in their villages to tell them about the movement, he ate frugally, and always shared what he had in front of him. While such virtues of asceticism and humility seem anachronistic in today's world, it is striking that it was these qualities that drew Pathans to join the movement in the thousands and the ones that people talked about avidly up to the early 1990s. Every village I visited in the Frontier had stories to tell of this charismatic man, who dressed like a *fakir* but had the leadership of a Badshah.

The added attraction of joining the *Khudai khidmatgar* movement was also its uniform, the *surkh posh*. Made from hand-spun *khadi*, tightened with Sam Browne belts and mirroring and mocking the colonial armies' opulent red broadcloth uniforms, 'every youth looked like a flower!' said one veteran. At the heart of the *Khudai khidmatgar* movement's success lay the recognition that discipline was the most important asset of a mass organisation and to this end, it had two main branches: the civil and military wings. The former did all the organisational work, handled parliamentary politics when they won electoral power of the provincial government three times, published the weekly newsletter, maintained minutes from every meeting while the military wing engaged in the civil disobedience activities that

so unsettled the British government. Each wing has its office bearers: President, Secretary etc. for the civil wing and General, Subedar etc for the military. The movement experimented with democracy, electing the office bearers on the basis of Badshah Khan's philosophy of 'give it to the man who wants it least'. Training camps were held where regular drills, parades and the manoeuvres of mass protest were rehearsed. It was these 'soldiers' who then picketed courthouses, liquor shops, and government buildings and stood steadfast and courted arrest when faced with armed troops. The colonial government had to specially build the Haripur Jail in NWFP to house these new and unexpected protestors! This required discipline and courage, both of which were helped by being in uniform as it was by their inner strength of character, cultural and ideological traditions.

In today's discussions on Pakistan when 'being in uniform' has become such a high profile and contentious issue, it is worth remembering that uniforms have been used in the history of the same country in creative and positive ways: to instil discipline and courage in the wearer, foreboding in the enemy and camaraderie among the freedom fighters – but all in an entirely non-violent fashion. Generals who are non-violent and look like flowers could make for great statesmen!

In the early 1990s I had the opportunity to spend several months, over three visits, in various towns and villages of the North West Frontier Province. No other Indian to my knowledge has had so much contact and immersion in Pakistan society in the absence of any kin or religious ties there. As a doctoral student, a young Indian, Hindu woman, I was eager to experience and embrace a culture which could boast of such an interesting historical experiment – a non-violent Pathan movement. In many ways, those visits were a life-changing experience. Travelling the length and breadth of NWFP in search of the forgotten freedom fighters, I met thousands of Pathans and Afghans, slept in innumerable houses, befriended many women and men and spent hours with venerable old revolutionaries of the *Khudai khidmatgar* movement when I finally found them. They were keen to talk, to describe their movement, its novel ideology, its successes, their struggles with both the British and their own people for daring to upset all stereotypes and question the authority of the state and religious establishment alike. They had demonstrated that it was possible to be brave even when the enemy looked invincible and stressed that it was only compassion, discipline and patience which can give the courage which no gun can. These old revolutionaries wanted the future generations of South Asia to hear the story of the *Khudai khidmatgar* movement that has been erased from our history books.

Most of those brave and noble Pathans have now passed on; the stories they narrated were their swan song. It is now our duty to listen and learn for the future.

For a fuller account of the *Khudai khidmatgar* movement see Mukulika Banerjee *The Pathan Unarmed: Opposition and Memory in the North West Frontier* (2000) London, Sante Fe, Karachi and New Delhi: James Currey, SAR Press and OUP