

If You Remember This Man, Your Faith in Peace Will Never Die

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These are difficult times for those who believe firmly in creating a world based on peace. Every day the world appears to be drifting more and more towards conflicts and even the threat of the third world war. In these difficult times it is a source of strength and sustenance if we remember those who have made the most important contribution at world level to peace with justice.

One such truly great person whose contribution to the path of peace and peaceful, non-violent resistance to injustice will never be forgotten is **Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan**, more popularly known to his followers as **Badshah Khan**. Badshah means king, but this great man did not rule by force, he ruled with love over the hearts of his countless admirers.

He was born in the communities of Pathans and Pakhtoons in the parts of Pakistan located close to the Afghanistan border areas. Most of his work was among these communities which were widely regarded as being very violent and revengeful. However it is in these communities that he constantly and successfully spread the message of love and peace, creating volunteers of peaceful resistance who were involved in numerous struggles against British colonial rule. They were known to die in the struggle but would not raise their hands in counter-violence. The moral strength they created was so strong that soldiers refused to fire on these valiant but entirely unarmed freedom fighters. Soldiers were willing to go to jail for long years but they could not fire on these entirely peaceful freedom fighters because of the moral and ethical strength of the movement these freedom fighters had created.

Mahatma Gandhi was so deeply inspired by this phase of the freedom movement that he said that coming here was like a pilgrimage for him. Although Badshah Khan regarded Mahatma Gandhi as his mentor, Gandhi in turn regarded him as someone who was highly inspirational for him.

A legacy of the freedom movement of India which remains extremely important not just for India but for all of South Asia relates to the enduring great importance of inter-faith harmony which is extremely important for peace, stability and prosperity of this region.



Khan at a pro-independence rally in Peshawar with Mahatma Gandhi in 1938 (From the Public Domain)

A very important achievement of the freedom movement was that some of the greatest leaders, each of them with a following of millions, were able to create a consensus on some very basic issues of enduring importance. One of these related to inter-faith harmony. Within the main Congress led movement Mahatma Gandhi, Badshah Khan (Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan), Jawaharlal Nehru and Maulana Azad were the most important pillars of inter-faith harmony, although many other leaders of great stature also contributed much to this. Subhash Chandra Bose was another great pillar of inter-faith harmony, which was so visible in the Azad Hind Fauj he mobilized. Outside the main Congress movement, Bhagat Singh and his colleagues were known for very firm commitment to inter-faith harmony and strong opposition to communal and sectarian trends. This consensus of great leaders with following of vast millions was based on their firm beliefs on this issue and also on an understanding that inter-faith conflicts can cause enormous distress and destruction.

Some leaders of freedom movements who preferred a secular role for state did not engage very actively with religion. However Mahatma Gandhi while accepting secular role of state engaged on a regular basis with realizing a positive role of religion among masses and utilizing the spirituality associated with various religions to prepare a stronger base for some highly desirable socio-economic objectives. In local context he put more emphasis on Hindu-Muslim unity as a base of national progress, and Badshah Khan was the leader who came closest to him in this approach.

This strong commitment of Gandhi helped in the emergence of the leading political party—Congress — as a representative of all religious communities. The tallest among Muslim leaders to emerge were Badshah Khan (also called Frontier Gandhi) and Maulana Azad. The former in particular was very close to Gandhi, they both said they were inspired by each other. Badshah Khan formed an organization, largely composed of Pashtuns, called Khudai Khidmatgars (Servants of God).

Although Pashtuns were known at that time as people very prone to violence, thousands of Khudai Khidmatgars in and around Peshawar, during the 1930s, presented one of the most noble examples of non-violent resistance to colonial rule and its atrocities, so much so that Gandhi considered his visits there to be like pilgrimages. If any minorities like Hindus or Sikhs were threatened, the Khudai Khidmatgars were willing to take great risks to protect them. When Hindu soldiers led by Chandra Singh Garhwali were asked to open fire on Khudai Khidmatgars by colonial rulers, they refused to do so, instead accepting imprisonment for several years for this refusal.

Such inspiring examples of inter-faith harmony were repeatedly seen in several phases of freedom movement led by Mahatma Gandhi. Leaders like Maulana Azad close to him presented interpretations of Islam and the Koran which were very much in keeping with this spirit of harmony and peace.

Unfortunately colonial powers saw this growing unity as a threat to their rule and hence went all out to promote leaders from the opposite camp who had a sectarian and divisive agenda. Hence during a critical phase of a few decades, including the Second World War years, the most powerful support of the government authorities went to those leaders and forces who wanted to create divisions and conflicts among various religious communities of India. This strengthened them to promote their divisive agenda, paving the way for the extremely tragic partition of the country, with millions killed and uprooted.

Gandhi was heartbroken, but till the end he kept on his efforts for reducing conflict and

restoring peace, travelling in conflict zones at great risk and fasting for prolonged periods to appeal for peace. Often these efforts had amazing success in actually bringing peace to zones of big conflicts. He continued these efforts till at last he himself fell to the bullets of a fanatic in 1948.

Thus the great Gandhian project of inter-faith harmony got badly disrupted due to factors beyond his control, but this should not lead to an underestimation or devaluing of his life-long efforts to minimize inter-faith conflict and promote harmony. To reduce misunderstandings, he called upon people of different faiths to realize true spirituality based on peace and harmony. He encouraged those who presented such interpretations of religious texts, contributing himself also to this task. He urged people not to be distracted by occasional references to violence in religious texts, saying that these need to be seen in a specific context and not as a general guidance.

He also urged people to form an understanding of other faiths on the basis of perspective of devotees of those faiths, to have an attitude of understanding and an open mind. At the same time, he said, narrow interpretations should not be allowed to obstruct progress, harmony and justice in present times. Hence he was a devoted religious person who wanted to live in harmony and understanding with people of all religions and faiths as well as atheists under secular governance. This view of a religiously inclined person can be very useful even today.

Badshah Khan remained a living embodiment of this thinking of Gandhi for a long time after the Mahatma left us. Even in very adverse conditions imposed by Pakistani authorities, among his beloved Pashtun people he continued to attract millions of followers with his message of peace, justice and harmony. He combined this with an abiding and in fact growing concern for social and economic justice.

This came out clearly when the Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi went out of her way to invite him to come to India in his late years, to address the Indian Parliament and accept the respect and honor of a grateful nation which had been missing his benevolent presence for several years. He spoke passionately about inter-faith harmony as well as about social and economic justice. It was a great learning to see that despite the several years spent in Pakistani prisons (preceded by colonial regime's imprisonments), he avoided bitterness and spoke with great kindness. His simplicity was even a step ahead of Mahatma Gandhi.

The present generation owes it to the legacy of such great leaders to strive relentlessly to create a South Asia based on their great vision of inter-faith harmony and socio-economic justice.

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