

Gandhi and Frontier Gandhi

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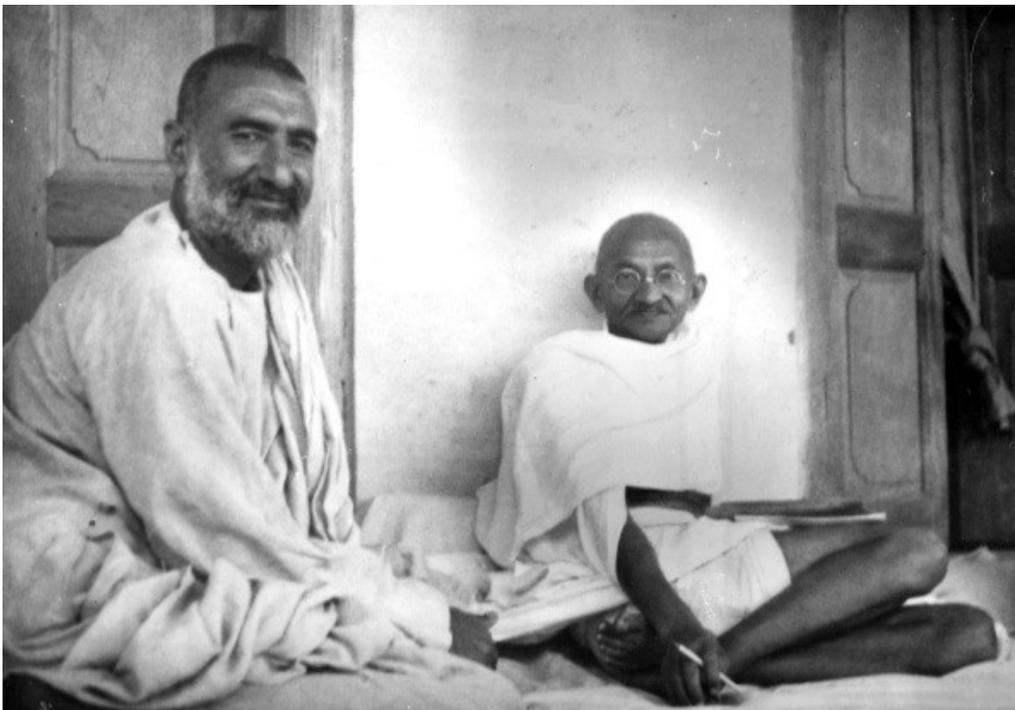
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Frontier Gandhi died on 20 January 1988, 40 years after Gandhi was assassinated on 30 January 1948. Their relationship – both personal and political – holds profound lessons for the world today.

*The Pathans (or Pashtuns) of the North West Frontier are regarded as a warrior people. Yet in the inter-war years there arose a Muslim movement, the Khudai Khidmatgar, which drew its inspiration from Gandhian principles of non-violent action and was dedicated to an Indian nationalism. On the anniversary of the death of Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan, founder of the Khudai, **Mukulika Banerjee** reflects on the legacy of this unique movement among that challenged traditional perceptions of wild and “hot-headed” Pashtuns and their relationship with Gandhi.*

“In the winter of 1988 an elderly Pathan, Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan, died aged 98. Growing up in Delhi I had witnessed over the previous years a long succession of obituaries and funerals as more or less celebrated veterans of the independence struggle had passed on to their final reward. Yet none had seemed to provoke either the genuine sentiment or wave of media coverage which accompanied Gaffar Khan’s final illness and death. Editorials eulogised him without fear of contradiction as the ‘greatest non-violent soldier of Islam’ and ‘one of the greatest nationalist leaders who claimed the loyalty of thousands of non-violent Pathans’. We were told that to his followers, far away in the North West Frontier, he had come to be known as ‘Badshah’ Khan, meaning emperor or khan of khans. For the rest of India his status had been signified by the honoured nickname of ‘Frontier Gandhi’.

At the time I was a graduate student in Sociology at the Delhi School of Economics and happened to be reading the classic anthropological literature on the Pathans. I observed with interest as the media told how the [Khudai Khidmatgar](#), or ‘Servants of God’ movement, had been a predominantly Pathan and Muslim movement which had practised non-violent methods in its anti-colonial struggle against the British and been the ally of the mainly Hindu Indian National Congress. Television documentaries showed the scratchy films of the nationalist period, in which a lean muscular man well over six feet tall with jet black hair and beard strode along next to Gandhi in the mountains of the Frontier. Newspapers printed similar snapshots of Badshah Khan standing next to the Mahatma, towering above him in stature but wholly attentive in demeanour.



The Khudai Khidmatgars had supported an unpartitioned India but in 1947 Congress had agreed to Muslim League demands for a referendum in the Frontier province. Boycotted by the tens of thousands of Khudai Khidmatgars, a low turnout gave a result in favour of joining Pakistan. Badshah Khan had then asked the Pakistan government to allow the creation of 'Pakhtunistan', a semi-autonomous region for the Pathans within the new nation, but the request was refused. For this impertinence, along with their apparently Gandhian method and close and continuing links with Congress, the Khudai Khidmatgars were branded traitors and Indian sympathisers and were punished by successive Pakistani governments with imprisonment and the confiscation of their land. Badshah Khan himself spent many years in jail before in old age finally entering exile among his fellow Pathans across the border in Afghanistan. I recalled earlier coverage of his occasional visits to India for political discussion or medical treatment, when senior Congress leaders had seemed to be genuinely solicitous about his welfare but also slightly fearful, as of a stern older brother. Badshah Khan retained his stern moral and physical presence to the end and had no truck with the later populism which Gandhi's grandson, the philosopher Ramchandra Gandhi, has dubbed in a delightful pun the 'grin revolution'. As Narasimha Rao, the Indian prime minister noted in an address to mark the centenary of Badshah Khan's birth, he was of that generation of leaders who did not smile and wave to the crowds but rather scolded them for their lapses, yet was all the more adored and applauded for it. Badshah Khan had continued to make criticisms of the policies and habits of governments in both India and Pakistan, but more than anything his survival into extreme old age was itself a living reminder of the austere ethos and self-dedication of that earlier generation of leaders, a tacit shaming of younger politicians grown fat with power.

As he lay ailing in Delhi the Government of India offered him a future resting place next to Gandhi's mausoleum, an unprecedented offer indicative of his prestige and stature. But characteristically Badshah Khan expressed his desire to be buried in the garden of his house in Jalalabad in Afghanistan where he had spent most of his later life. He was transferred from Delhi to Peshawar where he died among his family and followers a few days later. In an exception to protocol his funeral was attended by several national leaders, including the Prime Minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi, thereby implicitly attributing to him the status of a head of state.

The burial in Jalalabad caused other unprecedented events. A one-day ceasefire was declared in the Soviet-Afghan war so that mourners could safely traverse the distance between Peshawar and Jalalabad, the two cities at either end of the Khyber Pass which marks the official boundary between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Furthermore, the visa requirements were waived and for that day alone thousands crossed freely to join the funeral procession as it inched along the winding roads of the majestic Pass. In his death, Badshah Khan thus bore witness to the possibility of a closed boundary becoming an open frontier, restoring to the North West Frontier its open character of past centuries and eliminating the artificial barriers between the Pathans who lived on either side.

But for all the drama and acclaim surrounding his death, much of Badshah Khan's story remained mysterious to me. Unlike Gandhi, Nehru, Patel and Bose, my generation had not been taught much about him or his movement. While most older people in Delhi knew his followers were called the 'Red Shirts' because of the uniforms they wore and used this label (or its Urdu translation, Surkh Posh) when referring to the movement, no one seemed to know quite why had they worn uniforms, or why red ones, or why they called themselves the Servants of God. It seemed that the passing of the years, along with the distancing caused by Indo-Pakistan tensions, had made the Frontier even more remote and enigmatic to Indians and obscured this episode of our shared history.

The North West Frontier has almost as alien and exotic a place in the Indian imagination as it does in the British. Like many Indians, particularly Bengalis, my image of the Pathans and the Frontier was mainly derived from Tagore's moving short story [Kabuliwallah](#) about a friendship between a gentle Pathan peddler – and a little Bengali girl, which is tragically broken when the Pathan is sent to jail for murdering a debtor in a lapse of temper. Its successful cinematic adaptation was frequently shown on television and always moved me to tears. And as in so much of North India, we had stories in our family of similarly itinerant 'Kabuliwallahs' – men 'from Kabul' – who had come around each year selling dried fruits and perfumes from the Afghan mountains to my father's family when he was a child. Above all, for many in India, as in Britain, Pathans were like the brave and fierce but also wild Mahbub Ali in Kipling's Kim.

The classic anthropological literature on the Pathans seemed not so discordant with these literary images, providing more methodical but still colourful accounts of the system of blood-feuds and vendetta and the overwhelming codes of honour and hospitality among seemingly ungovernable tribes. And yet now in 1988 I had suddenly learnt that between 1930 and 1947 the Pathans, quite against their wild and martial reputation, had employed not rifles and guerilla tactics but rather the method of disciplined non-violent civil disobedience against the British. Moreover, belying their reputation for feuding and factionalism they had remained united for almost two decades. How had it come about that the same 'hot-headed' Pathans I had read about as a child and studied as a graduate student were transformed into a successful non-violent protest movement?

This compelling puzzle appeared unresolved, even unconsidered, in the academic literature. The anthropology I was reading at the time provided no answers. ...

Warming to the subject I found several biographies of Badshah Khan, the most definitive being by Tendulkar who had previously written an eight volume biography of Gandhi. This was full of interesting anecdotes about Badshah Khan, his numerous stays with Gandhi in Wardha and his sense of betrayal at the time of partition, but overall he is presented as a mere appendage to Gandhi, as very much the ninth volume. Other books had interesting sketches by his contemporaries, but again the spotlight was on Badshah Khan and his profound friendship with Gandhi, with the mass following figuring only as a shadowy backdrop. I thus remained in the dark about the masses of Pathans who had made up the rank and file of the Khudai Khitmatgars. Was their adoption of non-violence really so inexplicable, no more than a bizarre cultural joke? It was this question which drove my research."

From *The Pathan Unarmed* 2001.

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