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GANDHI, ISLAM  
AND THE PRINCIPLES OF  
NON-VIOLENCE  
AND  
ATTACHMENT  
TO TRUTH

by

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TABAH RESEARCH



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Gandhi, Islam, and the Principles of Non-violence  
and Attachment to Truth

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IN THE NAME OF ALLAH,  
MOST BENEFICENT, MOST MERCIFUL

I WOULD LIKE TO SPEAK a little tonight about what might at first be seen as incongruous topics, Gandhi and Islam. It would be best therefore to set out the premises of my examination of Gandhi, given the diverse narratives that have been constructed since his assassination in 1948. Primarily, and as a main contention, I do not believe Gandhi to be essentially a political figure as we understand that term today. Furthermore, he never held a political post nor was he ever elected to one. This is not the same as saying that Gandhi did not engage in politics, which he naturally did. Following from this, it is my further contention that the independence movement Gandhi prefigured was not primarily a political struggle but a spiritual and moral one. This is an important premise because it

precisely determines the analysis of the ends sought by Gandhi.

‘History,’ Lord Acton once said, ‘should be, not a burden on the memory, but an illumination of the soul.’<sup>1</sup> This implies the need for a synthesis of the historical flux into an intelligible form that can serve as a basis for illumination. It is common enough a point to agree that the function of the historian is to record socio-political facts, but we would add that it is no less his duty to provide also formulas, those relational aspects that are necessary to make such facts intelligible. It is this reality that Acton is referring to, and not what was designated by the eighteenth-century Jacobite Andrew Ramsay as ‘Valeur, conquetes, luxe, anarchie—voila le cercle fatal de l’histoire de tous les empires’.<sup>2</sup>

The movement that Gandhi precipitated can be described as a revolt against revolution, and I shall try and explain this. Historical induction provides us with the reality of four revolutions in the post-medieval world, religious by Luther, intellectual by Montaigne, political by Robespierre, and lastly economic by Marx.<sup>3</sup> These four revolutions strove for what men desired, namely faith, reason,



freedom, and bread. These four also correspond to the seminal appetites of men, thus archetypal and seemingly doomed to be repeated as paradigms in the world around us regardless of epoch. These revolutions, however, have resulted at every juncture in chaos, irrationality, famine, and enslavement to might. Precisely because they represent appetites, not subsumed to a higher power or order other than communal or personal desire, they were unable to provide intellectual coherence, social stability, and a sustainable code of life. Although Gandhi's revolt sought to achieve the goals of the four types of revolution, he did not seek them as goals separated from each other, but as ordered in a hierarchy, one that was determined by the essential definition of the human being rather than by a simple characterization of his apparent social needs.

There is value in this approach when we examine the political philosophies that have dominated modern thought. The liberal or individualist view maintained that the freedom of choice of individuals is an end in itself, the purpose of society being to preserve this. The essential values, however

inherent in the notion of the common good and social justice, are liable to be cast aside in this philosophy. The totalitarian view, on the other hand, maintains that the end of life is not the freedom of choice of the individual but rather the freedom of the group, despite the fact that the group may come to dominate absolutely the life of the individual. The fulfillment of society in the latter philosophy is not to be sought in the individual but in the collective, the commonwealth, the state. The third view, which serves as a median point between the two extremes, is that traditional philosophy is both communal and personal at the same time. The end or purpose of society here is the achievement of the temporal benefit of all by the cooperation of all. The community may ask the individual to sacrifice his temporal benefit for their sake, and he may do so; however, the community does not have the authority to ask or coerce the individual to sacrifice or injure his eternal interests, those that transcend temporality, for the sake of the community.

#### MAHATMA GANDHI

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born

in 1869 in the coastal town, now city, of Porbandar in Gujarat. His father was chief minister of the Princely State of Porbandar, despite belonging to a merchant caste. Gandhi's mother, Putlibai, a significant influence on him throughout her life, was a member of the Vaishnavite Pranamī sect that followed the teachings of the seventeenth-century Gujarati saint Mahamati Prannath (1618–1694). Her influence on the young Gandhi represented his first opening to equal respect for Hindu and Muslim beliefs, based on Prannath's synthesis of the two religions. The latter sect, for example, did not worship idols nor allow alcohol intake, and they revered a holy book.

In 1883, he married his wife, Kasturbai, as a thirteen-year-old and had his first child when he was fifteen, the same year that his father passed away. In 1888, and despite much caste opposition to his intentions, Gandhi came to England to study for the Bar exams and was enrolled as a student at one of the Inns of Court, namely the Inner Temple. He was called to the Bar in the summer of 1891, and returned to India hoping to practise as a barrister in Bombay. It is then, whilst reduced

for the most part to drafting legal papers, that he receives a brief from a Muslim trading concern, Dada Abdullah & Co. Durban, asking him to come to South Africa on a year's contract to resolve an internal legal dispute. He was, as it happens, to remain in that country for twenty-one years until the outbreak of the First World War.<sup>4</sup>

I want to concentrate on two significant events during his time in South Africa. The first relates to his relationship with the Chishti Sufi Shaykh Shah Ghulam Muhammad; the second involves the writing of his treatise in 1909, *Hind Swaraj*. In 1895, the great Chishti Sufi master Khwaja Habib Ali Shah of Delhi sent his *muqaddam* (deputy) to South Africa to set up a series of *khanqahs* (spiritual lodges) for the benefit of the several thousand Indian indentured labourers there. The aim for Khwaja Habib was to cater to the Indian workers' spiritual and social needs, and to this end the first mosque Shah Ghulam built was in Durban together with an orphanage and school. It should be remembered that the majority of Indians working in the Cape were Muslims. It is around this time that Gandhi becomes an admirer and regular visitor of

Shah Ghulam, serving also de facto as his lawyer. Khanqah records show significantly Gandhi's signature as a lawyer on the main welfare trust deed for the tariqa, which evinces a clear relationship of trust between the two men.<sup>5</sup>

The life of the khanqah must have had a profound influence on the young lawyer satiated as it was by the spirit of service, the commitment to serve one's fellow man regardless of one's station in life. More interestingly, one can see the practice of toilet cleaning, an act representing the humblest occupation usually carried out by the lowest caste members in Indian society, being performed by the most eminent spiritual members of the Chishti khanqah, a practice that was emulated by Gandhi in all his ashrams whether at the Phoenix Settlement or Tolstoy Farm. The ashrams resembled more the communal life of a Sufi order than what may have been recognizable to a Hindu observer. There is still much research to be done here, potentially providing much information on the structures Gandhi saw fit to inculcate into the socio-spiritual renewal he was advocating.

As was stated earlier, the appearance of Gandhi's manifesto, *Hind Swaraj* (*Hind* here meaning India—notice the use of the Muslim appellation—while *swa* derived from Sanskrit for self, and *raj* for rule), a work written during his sea voyage in 1909 from London back to South Africa, where he had attempted to lobby fellow sympathizers unsuccessfully, is significant in being the only work to have been translated from Gujarati by the author himself. It is doubtless seldom read now due to its trenchant critiques of modern sacred cows: industrialism, modern medicine, and modern transport to name just a few. Its importance, however, lies in its clarity, one that is noticeable right from the outset in the preface, and in its synthesis of dissenting English Victorian voices. He was introduced to Ruskin's *Unto This Last* (1860)<sup>6</sup> in 1904 by Henry Polak, and read the small book on a night train journey from Johannesburg to Durban. The influence this book had on him is almost incalculable, and yet he recorded what he essentially took away from it.<sup>7</sup> Primarily, he learnt that the good of the individual is contained in the good of all. Secondly, that a lawyer's work is as valuable

as a barber's, inasmuch as all have the same right of earning their livelihood from their work. The way of craftsmanship and self-reliance was seen as the way out of pauperism and indignity, and informed his championing of the spinning wheel.<sup>8</sup> Thirdly, that a life of labour, namely the life of the tiller of the soil and the handicraftsman, is the life worth living. 'The first of these I knew. The second I had dimly realized. The third had never occurred to me...I rose with the dawn ready to reduce these principles into practice.' He set up the Phoenix Settlement that same year just outside Durban on the basis of what he took away from Ruskin. It is this settlement that was to serve as a model for the later settlements of Tolstoy Farm (near Johannesburg), the Sabarmati Ashram (near Ahmedabad), and Sevagram (near Wardha).

Gandhi proceeded to serialize a paraphrase of Ruskin's book for the journal *Indian Opinion*, later publishing it as a pamphlet *Sarvodaya*. He reiterates in his book as a main theme the principle that modern civilization poses a greater threat to Indians than colonialism ever did. In the last chapter of the pamphlet, he discusses his understanding of

*swaraj* in opposition to the Indian middle class view. The latter identified *swaraj* with political power and economic prosperity. The first was to be attained by driving out the British by force, the second, by industrialization.<sup>9</sup> This for Gandhi did not constitute real *swaraj*, but a mere exchange of one tyranny for another. He believed that in addition to political power and economic prosperity, moral development was above all required. This would ensure the right kind of political power and the right kind of economic prosperity that would promote traditional values rather than destroy them.

To change India, what was required was the transmutation of its citizens into those in pursuit of the life of virtue. This was to be achieved through *satyagraha* (attachment to truth), a compound of two Sanskrit nouns: *satya*, meaning truth; and the word *agraha*, meaning insistence on or firm grasping of something.<sup>10</sup> Principally, to follow truth is to achieve *swaraj*: true home rule is achieved in proportion to self-rule. As we can see, this is a politics of the soul more than the politics of power play. Any other model, he asserts, would result in 'English rule without



the Englishman'. For Gandhi, the Truth is synonymous with God, so that to say (as the missionaries reiterated) that God is Love, was not enough. He further clarified:

In 'God is Truth', *is* certainly does not mean 'equal to' nor does it merely mean, 'is truthful.' Truth is not a mere attribute of God, but He is That. He is nothing if He is not That. Truth in Sanskrit means *Sat*. *Sat* means *Is*. Therefore Truth is implied in *Is*. God is, nothing else is. Therefore the more truthful we are, the nearer we are to God. We *are* only to the extent that we are truthful.<sup>11</sup>

So what is satyagraha? How does it operate? Satyagraha was generally considered to have several stages according to Bondurant.<sup>12</sup> The first stage is that of attempting to persuade the other side through reason. If this fails then the next stage is the realm of persuasion through suffering, by appealing to the opponent's unprejudiced judgment, so that the opponent becomes conscious once again and thus potentially subject to rational persuasion. If this stage also fails then the next stage is for the *satyagrahi* to

resort to persuasion by non-cooperation or some form of civil disobedience. It is in this sense that satyagraha, by serving the end of truth, becomes an effective technique based upon replacing violent coercive acts with non-violent but no less persuasive acts. The problem here is naturally the criterion for objectively knowing the truth that must be pursued and to which one must be attached. The truth for Gandhi is one that is inseparable from non-violence (*ahimsa*). The word *himsa* means injury derived from the root *hins*, to injure, kill, or destroy. In his book *Ashram Observances*, Gandhi defined *ahimsa*:

Ahimsa is not the crude thing it has been made to appear. Not to hurt any living thing is no doubt a part of ahimsa.<sup>13</sup> But it is its least expression. The principle of himsa is hurt by every evil thought, by undue haste, by lying, by hatred, by wishing ill to anybody.<sup>14</sup>

He further added in *Young India* in 1921:

I accept the interpretation of Ahimsa namely that it is not merely a negative state of harmlessness but it is a positive state of love, of doing good even to the evil-doer. But it does not mean helping the evil-doer to

continue the wrong or tolerating it by passive acquiescence. On the contrary, love, the active state of Ahimsa, requires you to resist the wrong-doer by dissociating yourself from him even though it may offend him or injure him physically.<sup>15</sup>

For Gandhi, it is not possible to seek and find truth without *ahimsa*, as they are two sides of the same coin, nevertheless one could say that *ahimsa* is the means, and Truth is the end. To establish the means one is bound to reach the end of truth. The criterion thus to test the truth is the strict adherence to *ahimsa*, which determines true action. The test of social truth is therefore action based on the refusal to do harm. A refusal to do harm involves necessarily that one may have to endure self-suffering (*tapasya*), which is one of the main arms of satyagraha. As Gandhi explained in a 1920 article in *Young India*:

Non-violence in its dynamic condition means conscious suffering. It does not mean meek submission to the will of the evil-doer, but it means the pitting of one's whole soul against the will of the tyrant. Working under this law of our being, it is possible for a single

individual to defy the whole might of an unjust empire.<sup>16</sup>

In chapter 17 of *Hind Swaraj* he explains:

A man who has realized his manhood, who fears only God, will fear no one else. Man-made laws are not necessarily binding on him. Even the government do not expect any such thing from us. They do not say: 'You must do such and such a thing' but they say: 'If you do not do it, we will punish you.' We are sunk so low, that we fancy that it is our duty and our religion to do what the law lays down. If man will only realize that it is unmanly to obey laws that are unjust, no man's tyranny will enslave him. This is the key to self-rule or home-rule...

Soul-force (*satyagraha*) is matchless. It is superior to the force of arms. How, then, can it be considered only a weapon of the weak? Physical-force men are strangers to the courage that is requisite in a *satyagrahi*... Wherein is courage required—in blowing others to pieces from behind a cannon or with a smiling face to approach a cannon and to be blown to pieces? Who is the true warrior—he who keeps death always as a bosom friend or he who controls the death of others?<sup>17</sup>

There in essence are the two principles that Gandhi enjoined upon those that wished to follow him in making *Hind Swaraj* a reality. Gandhi's first campaigns in South Africa were largely successful, setting a psychological and structural stage for later experiments in India. As was stated earlier, Gandhi was in South Africa on behalf of a Muslim firm. It should be added that many of the businessmen he worked with there had family roots in Porbandor and Bombay. These therefore were familiar people to him. As he once recalled:

When I was in South Africa I came in close touch with Muslim brethren there...I was able to learn their habits, thoughts and aspirations...I had lived in the midst of Muslim friends for 20 years. They had treated me as a member of their family and told their wives and sisters that they need not observe purdah with me.<sup>18</sup>

In South Africa, Gandhi was confronting a cause that made headlines across the Empire: namely, the treatment of Indians by the governing and ruling class. The political significance of such a struggle lay in the fact that Indians were fanned out right across the

Empire doing important and necessary work. The British Government could not afford therefore to alienate the interests of such a vital workforce. In other words, Gandhi's cause could not be ignored, and correspondingly was not ignored by the powers that be. The testing ground of India was to be somewhat different. Whereas the Indian identity in South Africa subsumed religious identity due to the common struggle, in India, Hindu-Muslim unity was not a foregone conclusion. When Gandhi came back to India in 1915, travelling around the country to acquaint himself with realities on the ground, the necessity for religious unity was foremost in his mind. He believed that such a unity was the only effective basis possible for resisting British rule.

After the First World War, wherein Indian Muslims had fought for the Mother Country, there was an expectation that the British Government would address certain Muslim interests. Foremost amongst these was the Khilafat issue, the possible dismantlement of the Ottoman Empire. The matter was of some importance not only to Muslims but also other Asians who saw the Khalifate as the repository

of the last autonomous outpost in a vast sea of colonized lands. The Ottoman Army had capitulated on 31 October 1918, leaving open the worrying question as to who would rule the Holy Places of Islam. The Indian Muslims had demanded that all armed forces be withdrawn from the Hejaz, Damascus, Baghdad, Jerusalem, Najaf, and Karbala.

As is well known, the 1919 Khilafat Movement was established by the two brothers Muhammad Ali, an Oxford graduate, and Shawkat Ali, together with active participation of Maulana Kalam Azad, an Islamic scholar and student of Maulana Shibli Nu'mani, and subsequently President of the Indian National Congress. This coincided with a conspicuously auspicious period of Hindu-Muslim unity over the unacceptability of the Rowlatt Bills, passed to allow undetermined preventive detention for those threatening public safety as well as expedited trials with no right of appeal. Gandhi joined forces with the Khilafat Movement, on the basis that all Indians should follow suit as a matter of common religious support for legitimate and necessary Muslim demands. Gandhi wrote in 1920:

I hold it to be utterly impossible for Hindus and [Muslims] to intermarry and yet retain intact each other's religion. And the true beauty of Hindu- [Muslim] Unity lies in each remaining true to his own religion and yet being true to each other. [...] What then does the Hindu- [Muslim] Unity consist in and how can it be best promoted? The answer is simple. It consists in our having a common purpose, a common goal and common sorrows.<sup>19</sup>

The three Muslim leaders agreed with Gandhi on aims, especially home-rule, but not immediately on method. Non-violence, if accepted by them, was seen as a matter of policy and not creed, a position that was equally held by the Congress throughout the Independence struggle. The launch of the non-cooperation movement against the Rowlatt Bills began in March 1919 and lasted for seven weeks, the first satyagraha movement launched in India. Here was an indication of total unity between Hindus and Muslims right across Indian society in facing the Rowlatt laws. The movement was unsuccessful in securing a comprehensive adherence to non-violence, and despite



some success was prematurely called off. In November 1919, Gandhi warned the government that unless Muslim demands were met, he would launch a nationwide non-cooperation movement in support of them.

Maulana Kalam Azad was appointed to the Central Khilafat Committee for Non-Cooperation in May 1920, having met Gandhi for the first time earlier in the year at a conference in Delhi. During this time, Congress conferences were taking place consecutively with Khilafat conferences and Muslim leaders such as Azad were participating in both. In March, Gandhi announced his non-cooperation satyagraha. In May, at the Meerut Khilafat Conference, Gandhi set out his plans for non-cooperation for the first time on a public platform. By June, the ulama of India had issued fatwas enjoining Muslims' non-cooperation with the British as a religious duty, but, more interestingly, encouraging cooperation with Hindus and endorsing Gandhi's leadership.<sup>20</sup> By December, there was near unanimity on the program for non-cooperation. Part of the plan for this involved the setting of national institutions to replace British-run institutions.

It is in this vein that Azad invited Gandhi in December to inaugurate the Madrasa Islamiya in Calcutta as a replacement for the Madrasa Aliya. In his speech to the students, extolling their sacrifice and hardship in leaving a known institution for one that was untried, Azad also turned to Gandhi and said:

It is only a jeweller who can recognize a genuine gem; and you are indeed that—the finest connoisseur of the jewels of ‘sacrifice’ and ‘genuineness’.<sup>21</sup>

Hindu–Muslim unity during this period was declared a prerequisite for the success of any national movement. At the Khilafat Conference of 1921, held in Agra, Azad even went further by stating that if Indian Muslims wanted to fulfill their duty to their country in accordance with the Shari‘ah then they were bound to become one with their Hindu brothers. He further stated that it was his belief that Muslims could not even perform their religiously-mandated obligations (*fara'id*) unless they reached an accord with their Hindu neighbours. Azad also provided the precedent of the Prophet’s covenant (Allah

bless him and grant him peace) with the non-Muslim inhabitants of Medina for Indian Muslims to unite with the Hindus against a common enemy.<sup>23</sup> The search for unity was not, however, driven by political expediency in facing the British. Azad explicitly stated on this:

They (Hindus) should have no doubt that the Muslims have embraced them on their own. Their embrace has been extended to them by the Will of Allah and his Shariat.<sup>24</sup>

The Khilafat Movement was short lived, lasting between 1919–1922, but was instrumental in putting into effect an imperial question before the British Government, and elevating Gandhi to true national stature. In fact, there is even anecdotal evidence to suggest that it was Shaukat Ali that first bestowed on Gandhi the title of Mahatma. During those three years, Gandhi toured the country with the aforementioned Muslim leaders, until they were arrested in 1921/22. As in South Africa, the khilafat was a cause that had ramifications well beyond India and its particular problems. Faisal Devji in his recent

book on Gandhi is right in saying that ‘only the Khilafat Movement, and by extension Islam, raised Indian concerns to imperial or international heights because it had political implications that extended beyond the would-be borders of a national state’.<sup>25</sup>

Gandhi’s perception and understanding of Islam was mediated through his mother’s faith as well as his early reading in London and South Africa. He had read avidly, we know, Carlyle’s *Heroes and Hero-worship*, and especially the sympathetic chapter on the Prophet as hero. While in jail between 1922–1924, Gandhi took up the learning of Urdu as well as the writing of his autobiography.<sup>26</sup> It was during this period that Gandhi also began reading Shibli Nu‘mani’s two-volume work on the life of the Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace) as well as Maulana Hasrat Mohani’s *Leaves from the Lives of the Companions of the Prophet*. He wrote at the time:

I became more than ever convinced that it was not the sword that won a place for Islam in those days in the scheme of life. It was the rigid simplicity, the utter self-effacement of the Prophet, the scrupulous regard for

pledges, his intense devotion to his friends and followers, his intrepidity, his fearlessness, his absolute trust in God and his own mission. These and not the sword carried everything before them and surmounted every obstacle.<sup>27</sup>

In 1934, whilst addressing a meeting to commemorate the Prophet's birth, he remembered his time in jail in 1922, which had allowed him to read about the Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace) and his Companions. He then added significantly:

The Prophet was a fakir. He had renounced everything. He could have commanded wealth if he had so desired. Even as you would, I shed tears of joy when I read of the privations he, his family and companions suffered voluntarily. How can a Truth-Seeker like me help respecting one whose mind was constantly fixed on God, who ever walked in God's fear and who had boundless compassion for Mankind.<sup>28</sup>

In 1928, at a meeting of the Indian National Congress at Calcutta, Gandhi spoke of the satyagraha and the necessity of espousing the principle of non-violence. At one point in the

speech, a heckler rose up and told Gandhi that he was a coward. Gandhi looked back at him and smiled. A Pashtun in the audience that day watched the incident and was deeply impressed by the dignity and authority of Gandhi. His name was Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan and he would later in the same year organize a standing army devoted to action through non-violence, arguably the most formidable foe to face the British Raj.

#### THE KHUDAI KHIDMATGAR (KK)

Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan formed the Khudai Khidmatgar, the servants of God, in November 1929 in the border town of Uthmanzai in the Charsadda District, neighbouring the Afghan border and about thirty miles from Peshawar. It was also there that Abdul Ghaffar was born on 6 February 1890, into a Pashtun family, descendants of the Prophet on his father's side. Although he lived to the age of ninety-eight, he incredulously spent one out of every three days of his life in jail, and then usually in solitary confinement. In 1896, William Crooke described the Pashtuns in the following words: 'The true Pathan (Pashtun) is perhaps the most barbaric

of all the races with which we are brought into contact. Pashtuns are cruel, bloodthirsty and vindictive in the highest degree.’<sup>29</sup>

The commander of British frontier forces wrote in 1859 that it was necessary ‘to carry destruction, if not destitution, into the homes of some hundreds of families’ because ‘with savage tribes, to whom there is no right but might, the only course open [to the British] as regards humanity as well as policy, is to make all suffer’. Indeed, ‘if objection be taken to the nature of punishment inflicted as repugnant to civilization, the answer is that savages cannot be met and checked by civilized warfare, and that to spare their houses and crops would be to leave them unpunished and, therefore, unrestrained. In short, civilized warfare is inapplicable.’<sup>30</sup> The frontier tribes were fiercely proud and followed a tribal code of honour known as the Pashtunwali. The insensitivity shown by the British Raj to this code revealed the contempt with which the Pashtuns were held. This is evidenced by the enactment in 1901 of the infamous Frontier Crimes Regulation (known as the Black law) to allow transportation or summary arrest of any Pashtun deemed to be troublesome and

without any hope of due process. It should be pointed out that as early as 1842, an army of 4,500 British soldiers was exterminated in a campaign against the frontier Pashtun villages. Of this force, one man alone was allowed to survive to tell the tale to the British authorities.

As a young boy Abdul Ghaffar attended the Edwards Mission High School in Peshawar, as did his brother, under the tireless figure of the Reverend Wigram, but unlike his brother refused a commission into the Pashtun Corps of Guides due to the high-handed treatment of an Indian soldier by a British officer that he witnessed. This was an elite group created by the British in 1847 as a Frontier force, the first corps in British military history to dress in Khaki. Their fame was later consolidated when they became the main relief force in the siege of Delhi in 1857, marching over 600 miles in the month of Ramadan.

Bowing to pressure from his mother, Abdul Ghaffar agreed not to leave India to study engineering in England but studied instead at Aligarh University. In 1911, we find him joining the liberation movement established by Haji Sahib of Turangzai (Turangzai



Babaji), a graduate of Darul Uloom Deoband, leading to both men engaging in widespread social work and education amongst the villages of the NW Frontier. As a result of this work, hundreds of schools were established within a few years. It was the futility of the guerilla war established by Haji Sahib during the First World War against the British that led Abdul Ghaffar to seek other political and social means. As it happens Haji Sahib ended up signing a truce with the British in 1923. In 1919, having become a prominent figure amongst the Pashtun, Abdul Ghaffar was given the title of Badshah Khan at a meeting of over 100,000 people by the Khans of Hashatnagar in recognition of the extensive social and educational work he had inaugurated. Nervous at the prospect of such a display, British troops surrounded Uthmanzai and took sixty Khans hostage forcing them to hold a jirga for the purposes of sending Abdul Ghaffar and his father to jail in April. In 1919, he had joined the Khilafat Movement and was imprisoned for non-cooperation activities, and in 1926 he left India for a tour of the Middle East.<sup>31</sup>

After several faltering steps in founding

organizations for the fostering of Pashtun culture, including a school in Uthmanzai, he founded the Khudai Khidmatgar at a pan-Pashtun meeting called to celebrate the re-accession of Muhammad Nadir Shah (later assassinated in 1930) to power in neighbouring Afghanistan. All members were asked to take an oath that obliged them to serve humanity, to abjure revenge, and to lead a simple life. Members were asked to sign the following pledge:

1. I put forth my name in honesty and truthfulness to become a true Servant of God.
2. I will sacrifice my wealth, life, and comfort for the liberty of my nation and people.
3. I will never be a party to factions, hatred, or jealousies with my people; and will side with the oppressed against the oppressor.
4. I will not become a member of any other rival organization, nor will I stand in an army.
5. I will faithfully obey all legitimate orders of all my officers all the time.
6. I will live in accordance with the principles of non-violence.

7. I will serve all God's creatures alike; and my object shall be the attainment of the freedom of my country and my religion.
8. I will always see to it that I do what is right and good.
9. I will never desire any reward whatever for my service.
10. All my efforts shall be to please God, and not for any show or gain.<sup>32</sup>

Abdul Ghaffar had heard Gandhi's message for satyagraha but had come to the realization of the value of non-violence independently through a thorough analysis of the life of the Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace) together with the increasingly visible futility of the armed struggle in the Frontier territories. Taking up arms against the British had been undertaken to restore honour, to secure basic freedoms, and to secure a unified struggle. Hearing Gandhi's call had established a complementary call to the consciousness of the validity of his own thoughts. By the early 1920s, these aims had not been fulfilled and were proving counter-productive. The peaceable establishment of a Pashtun-speaking school, the Azad School,

in 1921 in Uthmanzai led the British to harass and pressurize the teachers to leave and regain posts in government schools. The Chief Commissioner Sir John Maffey even summoned Abdul Ghaffar's father to pressurize him to curtail his son's activities.<sup>33</sup> Abdul Ghaffar won his father over and continued with his educational programs. The British arrested him and placed him in solitary confinement for three years. When he came out in 1924, his leadership was undisputed, the people having given him the title of *Fakhr-e Afghan*, the pride of the Afghans. The world had somewhat changed on his release. Turkish Muslims rather than the British or Allied forces had abolished the Caliphate, and the Khilafat Movement subsequently fell apart. The Muslim Ali brothers were in jail, and Gandhi had just been himself released from jail, ill and seemingly broken.

In 1926, his father having died, Abdul Ghaffar went on hajj touring the Levant at the same time. In Taif he had wanted to visit the town where the Prophet's arrival had been met by equal volleys of stones and abuse. The Prophet's reaction, Abdul Ghaffar recounted, had been to pray for them, saying 'Oh

Allah, be Thou their Guide and show them Thy ways'.<sup>34</sup> After visiting the Middle East including Iraq and Palestine, he returned to India having better contextualized the Indian National Movement with the nationalist aspirations he had seen on his tour.

In December 1928, as mentioned before, Abdul Ghaffar went to Calcutta to attend the Khilafat conference, presided over by Muhammad Ali. A Congress conference was also being concurrently held in Calcutta and presided over by Gandhi. Muhammad Ali marred the Khilafat conference by trading insults and losing his temper at a delegate from the Punjab. This contrasted markedly with the quiet dignity of the Congress conference, where Gandhi pacified a heckler with a quiet and simple smile. Abdul Ghaffar had famously addressed Muhammad Ali saying, 'You are our leader, and we wish you to grow in stature. How nice it would be to cultivate some tolerance and self-restraint.' It is reported that Muhammad Ali shouted back, 'Oh, wild Pathans have come to teach Muhammad Ali!' and duly stormed out.

In the summer of 1929, Abdul Ghaffar met Gandhi and Nehru for the first time

in Lucknow. Not much is known of the discussions but on his return to Uthmanzai, he resolved to set up an organization to form a structure through which a socio-political transformation might take place. This took place in September 1929.

Abdul Ghaffar summarized Islam into three key concepts, '*amal* (good works), *yaqin* (certain faith) and *mahabba* (love), manifested in the life of the Prophet. It is true that he focused his attention on the Meccan period of the Prophet's mission, where Muslims were under the rule of the Quraysh. Whereas most Orientalist as well as some native narratives have presented the Meccan period as typified by Muslim weakness in the face of an overwhelming foe, necessitating non-violent resistance as a matter of policy and common sense, Abdul Ghaffar saw this differently. Non-violence he argued primarily was not a weapon of the weak, but a weapon of the strong, a weapon of the Prophet. He stated to followers in 1929:

I am going to give you such a weapon that the police and army will not be able to stand against it. It is the weapon of the Prophet,

but you are not aware of it. That weapon is patience and righteousness. No power on earth can stand against it. When you go back to your villages, tell your brethren there is an army of God and its weapon is patience. Ask your brethren to join the army of God. Endure all hardships. If you exercise patience, victory will be yours.<sup>36</sup>

The second lesson to draw from the Meccan period for Abdul Ghaffar was that the strength of the Prophet did not wax and wane but was consistent with the integrity of his holy character. In other words, the strength of the Prophetic methodology was not compromised in Mecca, and then only in Medina given space to manifest itself. The Qur'anic suras enjoining Muslims to seek the reward of God's pleasure, such as *al-Shura* 40–43, where the right of reciprocity in retaliation is permitted but is juxtaposed with a higher divine recompense offered for forgiveness and reconciliation, served inter alia as a strong foundation for Abdul Ghaffar's message. The principle is that forgiveness is the higher path: one carries a divine reward, the other does not.

The recompense for an injury is an injury equal thereto, but if a person forgives and makes reconciliation, his reward is due from God, for God loves not those who do wrong. But indeed if any do help and defend themselves after a wrong is done to them, against such a person there is no cause for blame. The blame is only against those who oppress others with wrongdoing and insolently transgress beyond bounds throughout the land, defying right and justice. For such people there will be a terrible penalty. But indeed if any one of you show patience and forgive, that would truly be an exercise of courageous will and resolution in the conduct of affairs.<sup>37</sup>

Towards the latter half of 1929, Abdul Ghaffar was touring the mountain villages as he had once done recruiting villagers for his cause. During this process their white clothes were noticeably getting increasingly soiled. One enterprising companion took his shirt, trousers, and turban to one of the many tanneries to be then found in the Pashtun villages, a legacy of the shoe sole dying industry, and dipped in a vat of tannin or a solution of Pine bark produced a dark red



colour. Others followed suit and from then on the Khudai Khidmatgars were known and recognized as the Red Shirts.<sup>38</sup> In December 1929, Gandhi moved a resolution in Lahore at a Congress conference to launch a wave of non-cooperation for independence. Abdul Ghaffar was in attendance with several representatives of his organization. At midnight on 31 December 1929, the resolution was passed, Nehru celebrating among the Pathans by donning one of their turbans.<sup>39</sup>

Gandhi decided the first move would be against the salt tax, by leading the people on 12 March from Ahmedabad to Dandi on the sea to make, sell, and buy salt without paying the government salt tax. The Frontier was at the forefront of these disturbances. On 23 April, Abdul Ghaffar was arrested after giving a speech at Uthmanzai. He was taken into custody just outside Peshawar in Naki Thana where there were no Khudai Khidmatgar until then. Upon his arrest, the inhabitants joined his movement en masse. Afraid of an insurrection, British troops massed and stormed the town on 23 April and arrested the leaders of the Khudai Khidmatgar. A large group of demonstrators ended up in the Qissa Khwani

Bazaar. Two British armoured cars then drove into the square at high speed, killing several people. It is claimed that the crowd continued their commitment to non-violence, offering to disperse if they could gather their dead and injured, and if British troops left the square. The British troops refused to leave, so the protesters remained with the dead and injured. At that point, the British ordered troops to open fire with machine guns on the unarmed crowd. The Khudai Khidmatgar formed human walls in order to face the waves of bullets. Many cried out '*Allah akbar*' and clutched the Qur'an as they went to their death. It is said that 400 people died in this way that day. Most bodies were later found to have more than twenty bullet wounds. The onslaught went on for six hours as Khudai Khidmatgar members were chased down the alleys and pathways of Peshawar.

One regiment of the Royal Garhwal Rifles, heroes of the First World War, dramatically refused to obey their officers when ordered to fire at the Khudai. They were subsequently all court-martialled and given long sentences.<sup>40</sup> Out of the crucible of this disaster, the principle of non-violence was upheld and

led to the celebration of the heroism of the Pathan fighters across the world. Congress leaders were astonished at the integrity of the Khudai. When news of this atrocity reached London, a commission of enquiry was later established under the auspices of the Lucknow High Court, which decided that the level of violence visited on the Pathans was unjustified. The Khudai Khidmatgar had been tested and not found wanting. From his jail, Abdul Ghaffar asked the Muslim League to help their cause. The League, however, supported an alliance with the British in their search for an independent state. They refused to cooperate. On this basis Abdul Ghaffar and his Pathans joined the Congress.

The son of Abdul Ghaffar was in later years approached by a former British soldier named Bacon:

He told me, 'Ghani, I was the Assistant Commissioner in Charsadda. The Red Shirts would be brought to me. I had orders to give them each two years rigorous imprisonment. I would say, 'Are you a Red Shirt?' They would say yes. 'Do you want freedom?' 'Yes I want freedom.' 'If I release you, will you do it again?' 'Yes'. Bacon said, 'I would want

to get up and hug him. But instead I would write, 'Two years.'<sup>41</sup>

## CONCLUSION

It has been all too easy in the last fifty years or so to essentialize Gandhi's message either as an all-Hindu affair or else a political cause alone. An important point to remember is that neither Gandhi nor Abdul Ghaffar had any personal enmity against the British. They saw the actions of the Raj as a dishonourable stain on an otherwise traditional civilization such as theirs. Gandhi never pressed his advantage politically when England faced grave dangers herself, lest it might be said that he took unfair advantage. Those writers in Victorian England who had revolted against the onslaughts of industrialism and imperialism, the twin destroyers of traditional England, might be said to have awakened his ideas and principles. His reconstruction program may be said to have begun in the study rooms he shared with the intellectual legacy of Ruskin as well as the Arts and Crafts and agrarian movements. The structures for the delivery of these universal ideas and principles, I would contend, were fulfilled in the Islamic social

structures. In the end, when one looks for the true adherents of satyagraha in an organized social context, on an unprecedented scale in India or South Africa, they are prevalently to be found amongst the Khudai Khidmatgar. Whereas the principle of non-violence was exercised as a creedal principle for the Khudai Khidmatgar, the Indian Congress was to exercise it merely as a matter of policy contrary to what Gandhi had advocated.

One of the central issues in the Indian struggle was how to retain personal freedom within the colonial state system. This is particularly problematic when state authority in the modern state structure is the sole guarantor, and one could say, grantor, of human rights. In the absence of a functioning state structure, or even under a colonizing state authority that withholds these essential rights from the colonized, one could ask: from whence should one gain dignity, and through dignity, freedom? For Gandhi the answer lay in one's *dharma* (tradition), and similarly for Abdul Ghaffar, the *din*. One wonders whether one can find a better expression of the Hindu-Muslim unity that Gandhi sought so fervently.



## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> J. E. E. Acton, *Lectures on Modern History* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1906), 317.

<sup>2</sup> 'Bravery, conquests, luxury, and anarchy—such is the fatal circle of the history of every empire.' He was a disciple of Fenelon and a Scotsman who lived in Paris and died in 1743. The quote is from his book *Les voyages de Cyrus* (Amsterdam: Covens & Mortier, 1728), 4. The quote I believe originates from Titus Livius' *History of Rome*.

<sup>3</sup> See Gerald G. Walsh, 'The Recapture of Order', *The Modern Schoolman* 13, no. 1 (1935): 3.

<sup>4</sup> For biographical details see inter alia, Rajmohan Gandhi, *Gandhi: The Man, His People and the Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); also, B. R. Nanda, *Mahatma Gandhi: A Biography* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1958).

<sup>5</sup> Sadia Dehlvi, *The Sufi Courtyard: Dargahs of Delhi* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2012), 32–3.

<sup>6</sup> Ruskin's title comes from St Matthew 20:14, 'I will give unto this last, even as unto thee.' The reference is to the parable of the labourers in the vineyard, where those that were hired at the eleventh hour received the same pay as those that were contracted to work from the start of the day.

<sup>7</sup> Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and other Writings*, edited by Anthony J. Parel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), xl.

<sup>8</sup> It was only on returning to India incidentally in 1915 that he actually came into contact with one. M. K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., xli.

<sup>10</sup> *Agraha* is a noun made from the verb *agrah*, which is the root *grah* ('to seize') with the verbal prefix *a* ('to or towards').

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Joan V. Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict*, rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), 19.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., II.

<sup>13</sup> 'Ahimsa really means that you may not offend anybody, you may not harbour an uncharitable thought even in connection with one who may consider himself to be your enemy...If we resent a friend's action or the so-called enemy's action, we still fall short of this doctrine...If we harbour even this thought, we depart from this doctrine of ahimsa.' Ibid., 26.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> M. K. Gandhi, 'The Doctrine of the Sword' (11 August 1920), in *Young India* 1919-1922 (New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1923), reprinted in *Non-Violent Resistance (Satyagraha)* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961; reprint: Mineola, New York: Dover Publications Inc., 2001), 134.

<sup>17</sup> Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence*, 92-3.



<sup>18</sup> Sheila McDonough, *Gandhi's Responses to Islam* (New Delhi: D. K. Printworld (P) Ltd., 1994), 17.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Faisal Devji, *The Impossible Indian: Gandhi and the Temptation of Violence* (London: Hurst & Company, 2012), 53.

<sup>20</sup> Syeda Saiyidain Hameed, *Maulana Azad, Islam and the Indian National Movement* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), 91.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Devji, *The Impossible Indian*, 78.

<sup>26</sup> It is one of the ironies of history that at the same time as he was dictating his seminal book, *My Experiments with Truth*, to a fellow prisoner in Ahmedabad (1922–24), Adolf Hitler was dictating an altogether different book to Rudolf Hess, *Mein Kampf*, at Landberg Prison (1924, imprisoned for 264 days). One wonders had Hitler been given more time, whether much unpleasantness might have been avoided and a better book produced.

<sup>27</sup> Raghavan Iyer, *The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 1, *Civilization, Politics, and Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 185–6.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 513.

<sup>29</sup> Robert C. Johansen, 'Radical Islam and Non-violence: A Case Study of Religious Empowerment and Constraint Among Pashtuns', *Journal of Peace Research* 34, no. 1 (1997): 56.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>31</sup> Amitabh Pal, *Islam Means Peace: Understanding the Muslim Principle of Non-Violence Today* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011), 99.

<sup>32</sup> Johansen, 'Radical Islam and Non-Violence', 59, citing Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Modern Islam in India: A Social Analysis* (Lahore: Minerva Book Shop, 1943), 258–9.

<sup>33</sup> Jeffry R. Halverson, *Searching for a King: Muslim Nonviolence and the Future of Islam* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2012), 53–4.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>35</sup> Rajmohan Gandhi, *Ghaffar Khan: Nonviolent Badshah of the Pakhtuns* (India: Penguin Books, 2004), 80–1.

<sup>36</sup> Eknath Easwaran, *Nonviolent Soldier of Islam: Badshah Khan, A Man to Match His Mountains* (Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 1999), 117.

<sup>37</sup> Qur'an, 26:40–43.

<sup>38</sup> Gandhi, *Ghaffar Khan*, 84.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>40</sup> Ajay S. Rawat, *Garhwal Himalayas: A Study in Historical Perspective* (New Delhi: Indus Publishing, 2002), 135–6.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 87.

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