

Remembering Bacha Khan's Message In Pakistan And Afghanistan

Friday, 04 February 2011

Shaheen Buneri

Followers of the nonviolent Pashtun movement known as Khudai Khidmatgar Movement (Servants of God) are marking 23 years since the death of their legendary leader, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan. In addition to celebrations in Pakistan and Afghanistan, peace gatherings, discussions, and seminars are being held in Europe, United States, and the Middle East to pay tribute to a beloved leader who admirers say dedicated his life to social, political, economic, and cultural emancipation for Pashtuns.

These days, the region along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border garners international headlines mostly with images of war, destruction, and violence. From the rugged and mountainous Waziristan tribal region to the picturesque Swat Valley, the conflict between Pakistani security forces and Taliban militants has displaced millions of people, left thousands dead or wounded, and destroyed health and educational infrastructure in the region.

Many outside observers in the West do not know that peace-loving Pashtuns living in the violence-marred border regions once struggled under the banner of an epoch-making nonviolent movement. In the 1930s, Khan (1890-1988), also known as Bacha Khan (King Khan), launched his nonviolent movement to reform the stagnant Pashtun society and to mobilize Pashtuns to struggle for their rights against British imperial rule in the Indian subcontinent through peaceful agitation.

"Very rarely does the world see leaders who raise their society from the ignominious depths of ignorance and obscurity to the heights of enlightenment and glory. Abdul Ghaffar Khan was one of this rare breed of leaders," writes Sher Zaman Taizi, an eminent Pashtun scholar.

Himself the son of a feudal lord, Abdul Ghaffar Khan advocated land reforms, equal economic opportunities, social justice, change through education, and peaceful coexistence of all communities irrespective of their ethnic and religious affiliations.

Despite high claims and yearning for lasting peace and stability in the region by the international community, the fact remains that we have failed to revive Bacha Khan's philosophy of non-violence. The perpetrators of violence have seized the upper hand by popularizing characters like Mullah Omar and Baitullah Mehsud and marginalizing true heroic figures like Bacha Khan -- who is not very well known to the younger generations either inside or outside of the Pashtun heartlands.

"I was shocked at how we in the West know nothing about Bacha Khan," says Human Rights Watch's Peter Bouckaert. "We learned about Gandhi in school. Almost everybody in the United States and Europe has seen the movies about Gandhi and the role he played in the nonviolence movement and then as an inspiration for Martin Luther King and others."

Bouckaert tells RFE/RL's Radio Mashaal that he first learned about Bacha Khan in 2001, when, while sifting through some pictures in the home of a friend, he saw a photo of Gandhi standing next to a bearded man. His host then told him the story of Khan and his importance in the Pashtun community.

"As I learned more about Bacha Khan, I realized he was as important and as courageous a figure as Gandhi was," Bouckaert says. "He played an important role not only in the struggle for nonviolence, but also in the struggle against extremism."

Bacha Khan was a true visionary who believed that world peace is not possible without healthy debate on all outstanding issues between nations. He was a person who thought beyond the narrow interest of Pakistan, or India, or Afghanistan and pursued an agenda that sought to ensure peace in the region.

Khan paid a very high price for his activism. He spent almost half of his life in prison.

"I think if his message of peace and co-existence had been embraced by more people in the region, we would not be faced with the very difficult condition that we continue to see in Pakistan and Afghanistan," Bouckaert says.

Unlike in Pakistan, Bacha Khan is both well-known and looked upon with great respect in India, where he is known as "the Frontier Gandhi." The Indian government even bestowed two prestigious awards on Khan, the Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding in 1969, and the Bharat Ratna Award in 1987.

B.R. Singh, a former senior Indian civil servant, told RFE/RL of a visit by Gandhi to the frontier regions where he met with the leaders of Khan's Khudai Khidmatgar Movement.

"Gandhi asked them, 'What would you do if tomorrow Bacha Khan turns violent?' Now such was the impact that Bacha Khan had created, that they replied, 'We would remain nonviolent.'

"Certainly the Pashtuns had a reputation for violence, yet it is remarkable that Bacha Khan was able to bring about a peaceful transformation, and the Pashtun people followed him. He made them commit themselves to nonviolence," Singh recalls.

After struggling against social evils, superstition, and suppression for 70 years, Bacha Khan breathed his last at the age of 98 on January 20, 1988, at Lady Reading Hospital in Peshawar. Pashtuns -- indeed, all the people of the world -- would do well to recall Khan's message of nonviolence and peace. Today, we remember him.

<http://www.rferl.org>