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## Restoring Communal Harmony in India: A Critical Analysis of Wahiduddin Khan's Ideas

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### ABSTRACT

*Since India's independence and partition from Pakistan, the relationship between Hindus and Muslims has been marked by continuous conflict and mutual distrust. The effects of the British divide and rule strategy that pitted Muslims and Hindus against one another became a hallmark of the relationship between the two communities in the postcolonial period. Such divisions were greatly exacerbated with the coming to power of those who believed in Hindutva or ethnic absolutism. Islamophobia became normalized. Many Muslim scholars have come forward to address this quandary, foremost among which was the late Wahiduddin Khan (1925-2021). This paper investigates Khan's thoughts about communal harmony in post-independent India. I argue that Khan called for a reformation of Muslim minds, urging them to move beyond an isolationist mentality and find possibilities to develop their society within the status quo. Nevertheless, fraternity, correlation, and communitarianism are to be practiced obtaining religious harmony. Further, Khan's understanding of the treaty of Hudaibiyyah as a panacea to reconcile religious harmony seems insufficient.*

**Keywords:** *Hindutva, Hudaibiyyah, Islamophobia, Religious harmony, Wahiduddin Khan.*

A quarter of the world's voters and one-sixth of humankind reside in India. It is also the largest democracy in the world. A secular republic that upholds the notion that every religion in the country would be treated equally (Vaishnav 2020 & Hasan 1988), the gap between Hindus and Muslims in the country remains unresolved. Economic circumstances and the creation of a proto-democratic environment during the British era restructured local identities along ethnonationalism lines, giving rise to communalism in India (Shastri & Wilson 2001). Since the rise of those political parties that believe in ethnic absolutism or Hindutva and their electoral triumphs in the general elections of 2014 and 2019, the character of Indian nationalism has changed drastically. It has been re-evaluated due to this success, which has altered the political, intellectual, and normative priorities of Indian democracy. In *Listening to Grasshoppers: Field Notes on Democracy* (2009), Arundhati Roy explains how the deliberate use of religious sentiments for political purposes directly contributed to those political parties that use the ideology of ethnic absolutism or Hindutva to expand their influence in India. Religious minorities in the country have suffered bouts of overt discrimination and everyday microaggressions. The party and its associated organizations distinguished the religious minorities with Jains, Buddhists, and Sikhs regarded as groups that could regard India as their fatherland and 'holy land' and Muslims and Christians, as minorities whose 'holy lands' were located elsewhere (Kim 2017).

Further, Hindu nationalism propagated by the people believing in Hindu-Rashtra or Hindutva has strong majoritarian characteristics and is fused with a non-secular version of Indian

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nationalism. Such groups incite fear among communities and organizations outside mainstream Hindu society by demonizing minorities and branding opposition as anti-national (Girvin 2020). They believe in the ideology that considers India a Hindu nation and perceives Islam and Muslims as foreigners who came to India by way of invasions (Waikar 2018). This ideology has resulted in the surging wave of Islamophobia in India. According to a report published by the Center for Race and Gender's Islamophobia Research, Islamophobia in India from 2017 onwards was evidenced in various ways. It includes instances of communal violence inflamed by politics, damage to Muslim sites, territorial disputes, and symbolic infiltration of Muslim areas, such as spying on Muslim populations or disseminating anti-Muslim propaganda to induce fear and exclusion (Thompson et al. 2019). Muslims are the largest minority and the second-largest religious group in India. They make up 13.4% of the overall population (Sachar et al. 2006).

Faced with the above challenges, many Muslim scholars have stepped forward to articulate their views using traditional Islamic teachings and offering more grounded and contextually driven solutions. Among such scholars was the late Wahiduddin Khan, who trained in traditional Islamic disciplines. Khan's ideas are unique and unparalleled in the history of Islamic thought in post-independence India. His understanding of religion would appeal to the contemporary Muslim mind. He was critical of dominant religious groups and organizations such as Jamaat-e-Islami and Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind (a famous religious movement of scholars of Deoband).

He differed from traditional scholars. In *Islamic Thought in Contemporary India: The Impact of Mawlana Wahiduddin Khan's Al-Risala Movement* (Omer 2006), Omer, for example, maintains that Khan's ideas are based on 'ubudiya (worship) which differed from another prominent scholar, Abul 'Ala Mawdudi's views on *hakimiyah* (rule). He disagrees with the otherization of non-Muslims and considers them potential Muslims. Khan believes that Muslims are neither oppressed nor persecuted in India, and their demands will not be fulfilled until they engage in dialogues with the Majority community (Omer 2001). Omer explains how Khan has distinguished himself from his peers in his understanding of Islam. Islam is a personal struggle of a person in search of God and living a life of piety. Anjum and Wani, in turn, highlight Khan's rejection of the idea that universal or lasting peace can be achieved through social justice. The only feasible way to establish peace is the unilateral way without confrontation. In the modern age, Muslims can establish their *da'wah* empire. The current ideological vacuum of humanity can be fulfilled by Islam (Anjum & Wani 2017).

This article builds upon these previous analyses and argues that Khan presented a unique interpretation of religious harmony rooted in Islam yet relevant to contemporary India. Khan termed it as the *al-Risala* movement to achieve religious harmony. By this, he means that Muslims of India must take a unilateral and apolitical stance. The only possible way for Muslims in India to establish peace is to extract lessons from the treaty of *Hudaibiyyah*, which happened in 628 AD during the height of Prophet Muhammad's preaching of Islam to the Arabs. I contend that Khan's reading of the *Hudaibiyyah* treaty is novel yet highly problematic. He did not register the broader contexts in which the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) came to a peaceful agreement with his Makkan adversaries. This lack of understanding of the complex historical developments meant that Khan's use of the *Hudaibiyyah* treaty as a panacea to solve the problems of Muslim integration in India was driven largely by his apologetic attitude towards non-Muslims. Such attitude, I argue, was linked to his associations with secular political personalities and his hopes that Muslims would integrate fully within a secular framework determined by the majority population. Khan's *Risala* approach, therefore, could be read as an ideological reading of Islamic history to fit with contemporary secular agendas.

### **Wahiduddin Khan**

Born in a traditional family in Bhadaria, Azamgarh, Uttara Pradesh, on January 1<sup>st</sup> 1925, Khan was trained as an 'alim in Madrasatul Islah. Despite graduating from a traditional religious seminary, Khan remained sceptical and believed that the traditional understanding of Islam could not provide a solution to modern issues. He started to study Western philosophers, particularly

Bertrand Russell, which influenced Khan's views. As per Khan, he faced a personal crisis of faith at one point. As a result, he began to study primary sources of Islam rather than depending on commentaries and translations, which led him to rediscover Islam. He proposed his understanding of Islam based on peace, tolerance, and co-existence, which would appeal to the modern mind (Khan 2014: 6-7).

Khan's quest for peaceful Islamic da'wah and his affiliation with various Muslim organizations played a significant role in his intellectual development. Being an active member of Jamaat-e-Islami, he was a prominent orator of *Zindagi (The Life)*, the magazine of Jamaat-e-Islami. Nevertheless, he soon disassociated from the Jamaat and asserted that Mawdudi's understanding of Islam was mistaken. It was a reaction to Western colonialism and merely an attempt of political domination of Islam, which, for him, was un-Islamic. He believed that the idea of Jamaat would further deteriorate the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims (Sikand 2004). Though he was inspired by Tablighi Jamaat and called it a 'God-oriented religion' for its apolitical nature but detached from it, in 1975, for not being critical enough and rejecting the practice of *Ijtihad*. He was aware of the socio-political situation in India. Hence, one of his primary concerns was the growing conflicts between Hindus and Muslims in the country. Finally, in 1970, Khan established his research institute, the Islamic Centre (Delhi), followed by *al-Risala*, an Urdu magazine in 1976, which mainly focused on his understanding and interpretation of Islam and his peaceful da'wah mission (Sikand 2004)

Early writings of Khan revolved around Islam, science, and modern society, such as his work on the atomic age, *On the Threshold of a New Era* (1955). To understand Islamic teaching in the light of modern scientific methods, he wrote *Islam and Modern Challenges* (2011), and *God Arises: Evidence of God in Nature and Science* (2013). Khan asserted that the natural and empirical sciences prove the existence of God, the teachings of the Quran, and the Sunnah. He says,

Many modern discoveries support Islamic claims made 1400 years ago that what is laid down in the Quran is the ultimate truth, and that this will be borne out by all future knowledge (Khan 2013).

Khan argued that Islam is a rational religion and relevant to all time and space. Islam can provide the solution to modern problems (Khan 2013). In addition, Khan received various awards for his activism for peace and spirituality. The most prominent awards are Bharat Vibhushan (2021), the second highest civilian award, and Padma Bhushan (2000), the third highest civilian award by the Government of India. Demirguis Peace Award (2002) was presented to him in Zug, Switzerland, and the Sayyidina Imam Al Hassan ibn Ali Peace Award (2015) was presented to Khan by Sheikh Abdallah Bin Bayyah in Abu Dhabi.

### ***Al-Risala* Movement**

Khan initiated the *al-Risala* movement to offer a fresh perspective on Muslim concerns in the nation, particularly about socio-political difficulties and deeply held religious beliefs. Khan has quoted Quran to validate his approach to delivering his message to the masses. Khan saw reform as mandatory for various religions to eradicate distorted practices from their original teachings, unlike Islam. It remained in its originality from the first day of its inception, and there is no contradiction between Islamic values and humanistic principles. For instance, the concept of equality in Islam does not vary from the notion of human dignity in the contemporary world (Khan 1996). Khan tried to build a conceptual framework for cooperation with the people of other faith and contribution to the national building and referred to Maulana Azad's model. He asserted that reconciliation and non-violence are the basic principles of Islamic teaching. He suggested that Muslims should avoid any hostile, idealistic, or political approach to maintain good relations with other communities. To establish religious harmony, Khan encouraged Muslims to directly dialogue with the Hindu right-wing organizations instead of otherizing them. He strived for optimistic solutions to overcome the existing problems in the country. In the current political situation, Muslims in India must use all means to cooperate with the people of other faith and

develop inter-religious, intercultural, and inter-ethnic relations. They Must collaborate with others on essential issues such as providing access to education and moral values. The contextual scenario should not affect Muslims, and despite adversaries and restrictions, they must carry out the core duty of Islam, da'wah (Khan 1990). Through the *al-Risala* movement, Khan suggested that Muslims should practice self-criticism and not glorify the history of Muslim rule in India as it contains many unfortunate incidents. *ijtihad* must be practiced by Muslim scholars for rethinking and articulation anew the central message of Islam, keeping the modern challenges and their applications in mind. (Omer 2001). Nevertheless, this reform of Muslim society must be based on reconciliation and nonviolence.

Khan blamed Muslims for their negative attitude that caused religious violence in the country. Though earlier he believed that communal violence against Muslims is pre planned. (Khan 1964). He believed that conflicts occur with the presence and willingness of two or more opponents. *Al Risala's* approach was to promote extreme pacifism to avoid conflict. The concept of violence, Khan believed, is against the current age even though Muslims find enough justification for it. To otherize or alienate non-Muslims is against the actual teaching of Islam. Thus, Khan participated in the gatherings of Hindu right-wing organizations, which, according to Omer (2006), had a positive effect on moderate Hindus. It made them sympathize with the Muslim community in India. Nevertheless, as per numerous reports, after the partition, Muslims in India are facing tremendous threats from Hindu right-wing groups. The attacks against the Muslim minority have become a new normal in the country. (Siddiqui 2016 & Ramachandran 2020) However, the idea of establishing an Islamic state is implausible. At the same time, Muslim's cultural and religious rights are safeguarded in a secular political system, and they follow a viable portion of *shari'ah* in their daily lives having religious freedom. Muslims can reconcile their duties towards their religion by becoming an exemplary moral society and fulfilling their duties as responsible citizens of the country (Omer 2006). The apolitical and non-confrontational approach of *al-Risala*, as per Khan, originated from the treaty of *Hudaibiyyah* (628AD). Though Muslims saw the treaty as humiliation, it resulted as the cornerstone for Islam and Muslims in Islamic history. It was a peaceful reconciliation to avoid conflicts between Muslims and pagan Arabs. Muslims must follow the Prophetic method even if it violates their rights as the Prophet agreed with the unilateral conditions of Makkans. The ultimate objective of the Prophet was to establish peace that Indian Muslims should practice. (Khan 1990). He asserted that the Prophet and his companions agreed with *Bi'at al RidhwĒn* primarily to remain steadfast at *Hudaibiyyah*. Khan concluded that the pledge- *Bi'at al RidhwĒn* was not principally for war. Otherwise, the Prophet would not have agreed to unilateral terms (Khan1989). One may conclude that *al-Risala* promoted a pacifistic, unilateral, and absolute apolitical approach.

### **Gandhi's Influence on Khan's Ideas**

Khan was a great admirer of Gandhi's (1869-1948) nonviolence movement (*Satyagrah Andolan*), replacing political power through nonviolent activism and bringing social change peacefully. Nevertheless, Khan rejected the usage of force, protest, or confrontation. Thus, he disagreed with Gandhi's political engagement and criticized him for his act of civil disobedience to protest British rule. For Khan, such a rebellious nature still exists in people's psyches even after many years of the British leaving India. He articulated that nonviolence means apolitical passive struggle maintaining the *status quo* (Omer 2001). Yet, he did not identify how British rule could be abolished. Khan believed that an intellectual awakening movement was needed to purify the minds and hearts of Indians, which would put India in a leading position (Khan n.d.). Further, in 1924, Gandhi blamed Hindus for making some Muslims intolerant and creating a fanatic version of Islam in India (McDonough 1994). Similarly, Khan also accused Muslim religious and political leadership of being responsible for polarizing the environment in the country.

Nevertheless, Khan rejected Gandhi's idea of the unity of religions; *one religion underlines all religions*, which means truth in one religion is like that of other religions (McDonough 1994). Khan rejected this view and stated:

One solution commonly advocated is to spread the conviction that all religions are essentially one: that they are simply diverse paths leading to a common destination. However, Islam does not accept this view, and, in any case, experience has shown that repeated attempts to bring about harmony on this basis have been a failure. Emperor Akbar attempted to achieve harmony by state enforcement of his newly formed religion, '*din-e-Ilahi*'; Dr. Bhagwan Das spent the best part of his life producing a one-thousand-page book titled *Essential Unity of All Religions*; Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) attempted to spread this ideal at the national level by a countrywide movement whose slogan was '*Ram Rahim Ek hai*,' meaning Ram and Rahim were the same. Nevertheless, events have shown us that all attempts to achieve the goal of communal harmony have failed. (Khan 2004 132).

We should accept ideological differences and believe in '*let's agree to disagree*' to strengthen the essence of tolerance among different communities (Khan 2004: 132-136). It is necessary to promote a sense of patience, compassion, and human dignity among individuals rather than asserting that all religions are the same (Khan 1999: 40). As per Khan, we should not try to brand everyone the same to create a harmonious community; instead, we should cultivate harmony by accepting everyone's individuality. Human beings cannot escape their inherent tendency to diverge from one another. Therefore, mutual respect rather than mutual recognition is the key to creating harmony in society. Indeed, embracing differences is a virtue that helps people succeed and respect one another than being a sign of evil (Khan:2000, 40). The idea of the transcendental unity of religion is unrealistic. Differences are not a sign of evil but a quality of accomplishing success and respecting others. Various verses in the Qur'an support this idea of Khan (Al-Quran, 49:13, 5:48, 11:118, 10:99, 16:125, 2:256, 10:99, 60:8- 9).

Khan actively engaged in creating communal harmony between Hindus and Muslims, promoting his unilateral approach. Nevertheless, between 1977-1978 anti-Muslim riots reached a record of 547. It was a critical phase for Indian Muslims. Consequently, on 6 December 1992 Babri Mosque in Ayodhya was demolished by Hindu right-wing groups, which resulted in the widest communal violence in the country. Contrary to his contemporaries, Khan believed that the controversial Babri Mosque land should be handed over to Hindus to maintain peace in the country (Khetrapal & Pathak 2021). He said this would be removed once the Places of Worship Act 1993 is brought, which states that the *status quo* of all the places of worship, except Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid, will be maintained as of August 15, 1947. Moreover, Khan maintained that several mosques had been relocated in countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt (Wajihuddin 2010). In 2019, India's honourable Supreme Court handed the Babri Masjid over to Hindus. The Hindu side viewed the verdict above as a victory and saw it as a first step toward reclaiming the other two sites that are in contention, mosques in Kashi (*Gyanvapi Mosque*) and Mathura (*Shahi Idgah Mosque*). They believe these mosques were originally temples that were demolished during the Mughal era (Rai et al. 2020).

### **Khan's Understanding of *Hudaibiyyah***

According to Khan, his theory of pacificism was rooted in his understanding of *Hudaibiyyah*. However, it is not prudent to exclusively use one incident in all circumstances while ignoring other incidents and happenings in the Prophet's life. Islam always favours establishing peace over conflict. (Al-Quran 2: 205; 21:107) However, Islam had outlined fundamental guidelines for conflict resolution and peace accords with rivals, and it permitted Muslim leaders to act as per the context. For instance, the battle of *Uhud* was fought as a defensive war, while during the battle of Trench (*Ahzab*), the Prophet considered concluding a treaty of peace with some tribes by giving them a share of the annual output of dates, during *Hudaibiyyah*, all provisions of Quraish were agreed upon, and while conquering of Makkah, everyone was forgiven (Ibn Hisham 1998). Further, looking at the views of prominent classical scholars, one may conclude that during the treaty of *Hudaibiyyah*, the approach of the Prophet was different from other incidents, and it was an exceptional treaty that was directed by revelation. Thus, the Prophet did not consult with any of his companions though they were reluctant toward the treaty (Ibn Hisham 1998 & Ibn Hajar

1350 AH) Muslims were in severe grief with the clauses of *Hudaibiyyah*. Even Umar objected to the clauses, but the Prophet replied, “*I am God’s servant and prophet, I cannot disobey Him, nor He will destroy me*” (Ibn Hisham 1998). If compromising with unilateral conditions of opponents was the central teaching of Islam, then Muslims could have been happy with the treaty. In addition, in year 8 AH, Makkans violated the Treaty of *Hudaibiyyah*. As a result, *fath* (conquering) Makkah happened. Abu Sufiyan, a prominent leader of Makkans, requested the Prophet to maintain the treaty, but he ignored him completely. Hence, Khan’s unilateral approach merely based on the treaty of *Hudaibiyyah* as a model for all circumstances is erroneous.

### **Khan and Religious Harmony**

The etymological meaning of harmony is ‘joint’. The basic meaning of harmony is living together with mutual reciprocity and unity irrespective of religion, caste, race, and gender barriers. India is the world’s largest democracy, born with a constitution that pays remarkable attention to religious inclusion and secular tolerance of religious differences. In Indian political discourse, communal or religious harmony is considered a central ideograph. The significant importance of this ideograph is visible in the constitution of India. The constitution speaks about the ten fundamental duties of Indian citizens, and the fourth duty stated (Article 51A), “*to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India transcending religious, linguistic and regional or sectional diversities. . .*”.

Though Khan’s unilateral efforts to establish peace are significant, harmony cannot be obtained without observing the balance, and both parties must strive together to establish peace. It can be materialized only through the collective efforts of society. Further, fraternity is one of India’s basic foundational ideas, which is based on assuring individual dignity, unity, and integrity of the nation. Fraternity refers to a sense of brotherhood and belonging among the country’s citizens. It has no place for anything that hinders the unity of the state, such as communalism, regionalism, and casteism (Malik 2016). In addition, it is mentioned in the Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations, “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood” (UDHR 1948). Contrary to this idea, some narratives refused to accommodate Muslims and their religious identity (Siddiqui 1989). The Islamophobic narrative of right-wing organizations makes Muslims ‘the other’ to Indian society and considers them a threat to the country. Demonstrating Islam as a foreign and barbaric religion, converting indigenous Hindus forcefully (Waiker 2018). Such narratives have turned the country’s environment intolerant toward the Muslim minority community. Islamophobia has taken numerous forms in India, including hate speech, mob violence, lynchings, love jihad, mosque vandalism, and the destruction of Muslim-owned businesses. In addition, the situation further worsened by introducing the National Register of Citizens (NRC), adopting anti-conversion laws, and passing the controversial bill known as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in parliament in 2019, which grants citizenship to illegal immigrants from the Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, Sikh, and Zoroastrian communities of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, but excluded Muslims (Bhat 2019). Further, the year 2020 saw unprecedented levels of violence, including open calls for Muslim genocide, looting, and property destruction, with Muslims being specifically targeted. Muslims have been accused of spreading the illness on purpose and being responsible for the coronavirus outbreak in the country (Kim 2017). Khan’s understanding of religious harmony seems to be his miscalculating the context. He misread the historical context of *Hudaibiyyah*. Given the above context and the current situation of Muslims in India is different from that of *Hudaibiyyah*. During the treaty, both parties, Muslims and Makkans, mutually agreed and it was a written agreement of peace for ten years. Furthermore, Religious harmony is based on tolerance, mutual respect, mutual understanding, equality, and corporation in life and society. Different religious groups must practice tolerance and moderation and refrain from anything that causes hate, ill will, enmity, and hostility between people. Further, politics and religion should be kept strictly separated (the Government of Singapore 1989).

In contrast to Khan's unilateral approach, the idea of harmony generally entails three characteristics: correlative, contextual, and communitarian (Neo 2020). As a governing principle, religious harmony requires correlation between different religious groups, which means being in a mutual relationship with correlative responsibilities and corresponding rights, whether ethical, moral, or legal. This significant correlation aspect demonstrates the mutual reliance of religious groups as they are co-responsible for assuring peaceful coexistence. This correlation necessitates mutual respect to accommodate the differences among the groups. Another significant characteristic of religious harmony is being contextual. Thus, harmony depends on the negotiation of balancing different interests. Finally, harmony is communitarian and needs social and political compromise (Neo 2020).

Additionally, the Indian constitution obliged every citizen of the state to strive for harmony as a central duty. Unlike the scenario of *Hudaibiyyah*, the constitution of India gives Muslims equal rights as citizens of the state, such as the Right to Equality (article 14-18), the Right to Freedom (article 19-22), and the Rights to Freedom of Religion (article 25-28) (Bakshi & Kashyap 1982). Finally, as far as religious harmony is concerned, as Neo pointed out, it cannot be claimed that religious harmony exists if the rights of religious minorities are violated constantly, or they are persecuted (Neo 2020). Khan's unilateral ideas for religious harmony contradict the very concept of religious harmony. His approach seems inadequate as harmony cannot be obtained unless both communities mutually strive for it.

To conclude, during the last three decades, India experienced many incidents of communal violence that deepened the gap between Hindus and Muslims. Muslims were selectively targeted, their properties were vandalized, and they suffered the most in communal incidents that took place in recent years. Khan's efforts to establish peace are significant, and his idea of promoting a sense of tolerance, compassion, and human dignity among different communities is well appreciated. However, his unilateral approach to establishing religious harmony is contrary to the very concept of harmony. Religious harmony cannot be obtained unless both communities mutually strive for peace. Further, correlation and communitarian are the characteristics of harmony. It depends on the negotiation of balancing different interests. Further, communal or religious harmony is the central ideograph of the Indian constitution, and fraternity has taken an important place in the idea of India. Though Khan blamed Muslims for the communal violence in India, on the contrary, as per various reports, they are the primary victims of such violence. Khan's use of the treaty of *Hudaibiyyah* as a panacea to resolve the problem of religious harmony was misapprehension and driven largely by an apologetic attitude towards non-Muslims. Having found the issues in his understanding of religious harmony and the treaty of *Hudaibiyyah*, Khan's ideas seem irrelevant in the contemporary Indian context. Muslims in India need to move beyond the idea of Khan even though it is well celebrated.

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