

# Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan - Early Years, Partition, Arrest and Exile

Abdul Beber Ghaffar Khan, also known as Bacha Khan, was a Pashtun independence activist who campaigned to end the rule of the British Raj in India. For his adherence to pacifism and close association with Mahatma Gandhi, he earned the nickname "Frontier Gandhi",

He founded the Khudai Khidmatgar ("Servants of God") movement in 1929. The success of the movement earned him and his supporters a harsh crackdown from the British Raj, suffering some of the worst repression of the Indian Independence Struggle.

## Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan - Early Years

Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan was born on 6 February 1890 into a prosperous landowning Pashtun family from Utmanzai in the Peshawar Valley of British India.

At the age of 20 in 1910 Khan opened a mosque school in his home town. But the British authorities forcefully closed down his school in 1915, because they believed that it was a centre of anti-British activities. Their accusation was on the basis that Khan had joined the Pashtun independence movement of activist Haji Sahib of Turangazi, who himself was responsible for fomenting many anti-establishment activities against the British

## Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan - Khudai Khidmatgar

Initially, Bacha Khan's goal was to work towards the social upliftment of the Pashtuns as he had realised that they will remain backwards due to the lack of education and centuries of blood feuds between various Pashtun families. In time, he worked towards the formation of a united, independent, secular India. To achieve this end, he founded the Khudai Khidmatgar ("Servants of God"), commonly known as the "Red Shirts" (Surkh Pōsh), during the 1920s.

The Khudai Khidmatgar recruited over 100,000 members who became renowned in opposing and dying at the hands of the British authorities. Through strikes, political activities and non-violent protests, the organisation was able to achieve much political leverage and came to dominate the political landscape of the Northwest Frontier Province.

## Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan & The Partition

Khan strongly opposed the partition of India. For his liberal stance regarding religion, he was accused of being anti-Muslim by some politicians. It resulted in Khan being physically assaulted in 1946, leading to his hospitalisation in Peshawar.

On June 21, 1947, in Bannu, a loya jirga (grand assembly in the Pashtun language) was held consisting of Bacha Khan, the Khudai Khidmatgars, members of the Provincial Assembly, and other tribal chiefs, just seven weeks before the partition. The Bannu Resolution was declared at this jirga. The Bannu Resolution stated that the Pashtuns should be given a choice to have an independent state of Pashtunistan composing all Pashtun territories of British India, instead of being made to join either India or Pakistan. However, the British Raj refused to comply with the demand of this resolution.

The Indian National Congress party refused last-ditch attempts to avoid partition, like the Cabinet Mission plan and Gandhi's suggestion to offer the position of Prime Minister to Jinnah. As a result, Bacha Khan and his followers felt a sense of betrayal by both Pakistan and India. Bacha Khan's last words to Gandhi and his erstwhile allies in the Congress party were: "You have thrown us to the wolves".

## Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan - Arrest and Exile

Bacha Khan took the oath of allegiance to the new nation of Pakistan on February 23rd, 1948 at the first session of the Pakistan Constituent Assembly.

He pledged full support to the new government of Pakistan and attempted to reconcile with the founder of the new state Muhammad Ali Jinnah, with whom he had many disputes with in the past. The initial attempts at reconciliation, like the face-to-face meeting in Karachi, were met with success, however, a follow-up meeting in the Khudai Khidmatgar headquarters never materialised, allegedly due to the machinations of the Chief Minister of Khyber Pakhtunwa, Abdul Qayyum Khan Kashmiri, who insisted that Bacha Khan was involved in a plot to assassinate Jinnah.

Following this, Bacha Khan formed Pakistan's first national opposition party, on 8 May 1948, the Pakistan Azad Party. The party pledged to play the role of constructive opposition and would be non-communal in its philosophy.

Despite this, suspicions of his allegiance persisted the new Pakistani government, Bacha Khan was placed under house arrest without charge from 1948 till 1954.

Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan died in Peshawar while under house arrest in 1988. He was buried in his house at Jalalabad, Afghanistan. Over 200,000 mourners attended his funeral, including the Afghan president Mohammad Najibullah. This was symbolic as it insinuated that dream of Pashtun unification would live on even after his death.

Such was his reputation among the Pashtuns that a cease-fire was announced in the Afghan Civil War to allow the funeral to take place, even though it was marred by bomb explosions killing 15.

## Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan's Political Legacy

Bacha Khan's political legacy is renowned amongst Pashtuns and those in the modern Republic of India as a leader who propagated the message of brotherhood and living on the principles of non-violence. Within Pakistan, however, the vast majority of society has questioned his true allegiance due to his association with the All India Congress over the Muslim League as well as his opposition to Jinnah. In particular, people have questioned where Bacha Khan's patriotism rests following his insistence that he be buried in Afghanistan after his death and not Pakistan.