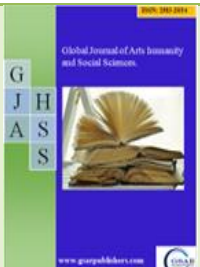
	Global Journal of Arts Humanity and Social Sciences					
	ISSN: 2583-2034					
	Abbreviated key title: Glob.J.Arts.Humanit.Soc.Sci					
	Frequency: Monthly					
	Published By GSAR Publishers					
Journal Homepage Link: https://gsarpublishers.com/journal-gjahss-home/						
Volume - 5		Issue - 9		September 2025	Total pages 744-748	DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.17199154

Bacha Khan: United India, Independent Pashtunistan, and Pakistan

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Article History

Received: 15- 09- 2025

Accepted: 22- 09- 2025

Published: 24- 09- 2025

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Abstract

Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, popularly known as Bacha Khan, stands as one of the most prominent figures in Pashtun history. He devoted his life to the struggle for Pashtun freedom, intellectual awakening, and unity, enduring severe hardships in the prisons of both British India and later Pakistan in pursuit of these ideals. His political struggle was marked by numerous challenges and shifting contexts. Bacha Khan's political thought and activism may be divided into three distinct phases: first, during the era of British India prior to Partition; second, at the time of India's Partition; and third, in the post-Partition period within Pakistan. This article examines Bacha Khan's political positions and strategies across these three phases.

Keywords: Bacha Khan, Pashtunistan, India, Pakistan, Partition of India, Congress

Introduction

Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan (Bacha Khan, Fakhre-Afghan, the "Frontier Gandhi," 1890–1988) was one of the most prominent political and social leaders of the twentieth century. He established schools for the advancement of the Pashtuns and, together with his companions, tirelessly struggled for the reform of Pashtun society, the eradication of superstitious traditions, the resolution of enmity and feuds among Pashtuns, and the promotion of unity. Through the philosophy of non-violence, he guided his followers towards patience and tolerance. In 1929, he founded the Khudai Khidmatgar (Servants of God) movement, which was firmly committed to the principles of non-violence. The movement later became widely known as the "Red Shirts." The Khudai Khidmatgars claimed that within two years of its establishment, their membership had reached 200,000 (two lakhs). (Afzal, 1987) They were instructed never to adopt violence, never to take up arms, and always to practice patience. They were also told that even if they were insulted, they should not seek revenge. (Shah, Abdul Ghaffar Khan, ?) Bacha Khan considered even self-defense to be a form of violence. He wrote: "*It is easy for a man to return a slap with a slap; but to endure a slap without retaliation is the difficult task*" (Khan K. A., 1387). It was precisely this philosophy

of non-violence that defined Bacha Khan's movement. According to him, in various parts of Pashtunistan, the British would beat and torture the Khudai Khidmatgars, force them to lie on burning sand, immerse them in freezing water, imprison them, and even kill them. Yet, Bacha Khan never resorted to violence; until the end, he remained committed to non-violence as the means to achieve freedom from British rule. In 1930, when the tragic Qissa Khwani massacre occurred, in which more than two hundred Khudai Khidmatgars were killed, the movement responded to the British solely through non-violent resistance. Even later, in his struggle for the realization of an independent Pashtunistan and subsequently for securing the rights of Pashtuns within Pakistan, Bacha Khan continued to adhere to the path of non-violence.

Bacha Khan's political struggle can be divided into three distinct phases: first, his struggle for a united India; second, his advocacy for an independent Pashtunistan; and third, following his oath of allegiance to Pakistan, his struggle for the rights of Pashtuns within Pakistan, for regional autonomy, and against the "One Unit" policy. This study examines the strategies Bacha Khan adopted in these three critical phases and evaluates the outcomes of his efforts.



Significance of the Study:

Bacha Khan is one of the most prominent figures in Pashtun history, and his political life and struggle on behalf of the Pashtuns merit extensive scholarly investigation. Throughout his political career, he faced numerous challenges, yet he never grew weary and continued his struggle until the end of his life. Bacha Khan initially fought against the British for the freedom of his people, and later, within Pakistan, he continued his efforts for the regional autonomy of the Pashtuns as well as for the rights of other marginalized communities.

Whenever the political history of the Pashtuns and the region is written, it will remain incomplete without reference to Bacha Khan's struggle for freedom. His political activism and his pursuit of objectives through the philosophy of non-violence brought him great fame and placed him among the ranks of the world's distinguished leaders. On this basis, the present work represents a modest attempt to study and analyze the political life of Bacha Khan, which is hereby presented to the reader.

Research Objective:

The purpose of this study is to clarify Bacha Khan's political positions during three major phases of his life: first, in the period of British India before Partition; second, during the Partition of India; and third, in the post-Partition era following the creation of Pakistan. The study seeks to understand the nature of the political stances Bacha Khan adopted in each of these three phases of his political career.

Research Methodology:

This study employs historical, analytical, and documentary methods. Both primary and secondary sources related to the subject have been utilized in order to compile and present the research.

United India:

In 1929, during the Congress Party session in Lahore, Bacha Khan writes: *"I, along with Amir Mumtaz Khan, also went to Lahore. We were not members of the Congress; rather, we were associated with the Khilafat movement and had gone merely as spectators. The Congress gathering left a profound impression on our youth. It was not only the young men who were inspired, but even Hindu girls had dedicated themselves to the service and freedom of the country and were standing firm in their commitment"* (Khan K. A., 1387). The main purpose of the NWFP delegates was to make Indian leaders aware of the difficult situation in the Frontier, caused by strict laws and the unfair treatment they faced because they were not given even basic reforms. They explained the current problems to the Congress leaders, who promised to send a committee to look into their complaints. Bacha Khan also supported the Congress call for "complete independence." (Shah, 2015).

After this, Bacha Khan went back to the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and started talking to the Pashtuns about India's freedom and their part in achieving it. He encouraged people by saying that working together was important for this goal. In

November 1929, the Khudai Khidmatgars (Servants of God) was formed. This new group replaced the earlier organization and soon became very popular and influential in the NWFP. The party called on Pashtuns to join, help remove social problems from their society, promote unity among themselves, and fight to free their homeland from foreign rule. (Shah, 2015)

In the year 1930, Bacha Khan was arrested. To his imprisoned companions he advised that they should convey their message to other political parties. They first approached the Muslim League to ask "our Muslim brothers for help" (Arbab, 2019), but the League refused to offer any support. As Bacha Khan noted: *"That [the League] is a party created by the British to counter the Hindus, whereas our struggle is against the British; how then could they possibly assist us?"* (Khan K. A., 1387). Bacha Khan's writings and speeches, as well as other Khudai Khidmatgar sources, repeatedly mention that the All-India Muslim League received support from the British. (Arbab, 2019). Following this, the Khudai Khidmatgars turned toward the Congress Party. Since the objectives and paths of both movements were aligned, the Congress extended its support to them.

After some time, Bacha Khan was released from prison. In 1931, the Khudai Khidmatgars openly declared their affiliation with the Congress. On August 9, the *Zalmo Jirga* (Youth Assembly) and the Khudai Khidmatgars formally joined the Congress Federation, though they retained their distinct identity (Shah, ?) The Khudai Khidmatgars did not view the Congress as merely an organization of Hindus; rather, they regarded it as the cradle and platform of all anti-imperialist forces across India. Moreover, since the British were committing injustices against the Pashtuns, and the Pashtuns alone could not withstand this struggle, it was only natural that they should seek allies both across India and internationally against their eternal adversary. This, indeed, was their legitimate right (Meshud,?).

When the Congress Party declared its demand for the withdrawal of the British from all of India and for the preservation of a united India, the Khudai Khidmatgars supported this call. Bacha Khan endorsed the philosophy of Gandhi and the Congress Party, which held that Muslims and Hindus had lived together in India for centuries and, once the British departed, they could continue to live together in peace.

The Indian National Congress was established in 1885, with its founder being a British official. In later years, there came a time when its leadership was even held by Muslims. From its inception, the Congress Party claimed to be a joint organization representing both Hindus and Muslims, rejecting all forms of religious prejudice. Its opponents, however—particularly the Muslim League and some Deobandi scholars—argued that the Congress was dominated by Hindus and opposed the idea of Hindu-Muslim unity. Nevertheless, within the Deoband school there were also scholars who supported Congress's vision of composite nationalism and stood against the partition of India.

Until the announcement of the Indian Partition Plan on June 3, 1947, Bacha Khan remained a steadfast supporter of the policies of



the Indian National Congress. However, the Congress leadership's unilateral acceptance of the Partition Plan without prior consultation with him marked a decisive rupture in this alliance. As Maulana Abul Kalam Azad recalls in his memoir *India Wins Freedom*, Bacha Khan and his Khudai Khidmatgar movement had consistently opposed the Muslim League and aligned themselves with the Congress. Yet, when the Partition Plan was placed before the Congress Working Committee, Gandhi lent his support to it. This decision not only astonished Azad but also devastated Bacha Khan. According to Azad, the acceptance of Partition by the Congress deeply shocked Bacha Khan, leaving him momentarily speechless. Bacha Khan repeatedly expressed that the people of the North-West Frontier Province would interpret this step as a betrayal. In his words, the Congress had effectively abandoned the Khudai Khidmatgars "to the wolves." (Azad, 1959).

This moment, as narrated by Azad, underscores the profound disillusionment of Bacha Khan with the Congress leadership and highlights the political marginalization of the Frontier Province in the broader processes of Partition.

Bacha Khan writes that with Lord Mountbatten's announcement on June 3, 1947, regarding the British-approved Partition Plan, all hopes for a united India were effectively extinguished. He notes that the Working Committee also accepted both the Partition of the country and the referendum in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP). According to Bacha Khan, the Congress, through this action, abandoned the Khudai Khidmatgars and committed an act of betrayal. In this way, the British authorities, the Indian National Congress, and the Muslim League collectively accepted the Partition, which ultimately led to the creation of a new country, Pakistan, on the world map.

Before Partition, as is well documented, Bacha Khan fought alongside the Congress for a united India, consistently referring to the entire subcontinent as his homeland. The terms "Pashtunistan" and "Independent Pashtunistan" emerged only during the Partition process. Prior to Partition, Bacha Khan and his followers worked shoulder to shoulder with the Congress in the non-violent struggle to preserve a large and united India—not for a separate Pashtun homeland.

When the Muslim League invited Bacha Khan to join their ranks, he responded: *"Once the British leave and this homeland (India) become free, Muslims and Hindus can continue to live together in a united India. These two peoples have historically coexisted peacefully"* (Easwaran, 1993)

Independent Pashtunistan

On June 3, 1947, the British presented the Partition Plan for India, which was accepted by the Congress. According to Lord Mountbatten's plan, a referendum was to be held in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), in which the people of the province would vote to join either India or Pakistan. However, the Khudai Khidmatgars boycotted this referendum. They demanded the right to choose between Pakistan or an independent

Pashtunistan, but the British authorities never agreed to this proposal.

On June 8, Bacha Khan wrote to Gandhi: *"We oppose this referendum... we are against Pakistan. We hope for the establishment of an independent government of the Pashtuns within India"* (Koreejo, 1993)

On June 18, 1947, Muhammad Ali Jinnah met with Bacha Khan. During the meeting, Bacha Khan conditionally expressed his willingness to support Pakistan; however, Jinnah requested that he first formally join Pakistan, after which further issues could be addressed through mutual consultation. Bacha Khan sought permission to discuss this matter with other members of the Khudai Khidmatgar movement and to inform Jinnah of their collective decision thereafter.

Subsequently, on June 21, 1947, the Congress Working Committee of the NWFP convened in Bannu. During this session, the committee reiterated its opposition to the referendum and formally demanded the establishment of an independent state for the Pashtuns (Shah, Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the Khudai Khidmatgars, Congress and the Partition of India, ?)

On June 22, 1947, it was decided that the Congress Party of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) would support Pashtunistan and would not concede authority to anyone without the consent of the Pashtuns. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad notes that neither Jinnah nor Mountbatten were willing to accept this demand. Mountbatten explicitly stated that the Frontier Province would not be established as an independent state; it would have to join either India or Pakistan (Azad, 1959)

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad further notes that the Congress had not fully considered the strength of the Khudai Khidmatgars in the Frontier Province, and their influence declined even further during the Partition. In the tribal areas, the activities of British officers openly supported the Pakistan movement, and the majority of tribal leaders were persuaded to align with the Muslim League (Azad, 1959)

Bacha Khan and Dr. Khan Sahib¹ believed that even if the referendum were conducted, it would not be the final word, and the Frontier Province could potentially reunite with India through Kashmir (Koreejo, 1993). The referendum was held from July 6 to 17, during which the Frontier Congress (Khudai Khidmatgars) did not participate. According to this estimate, 50.49 percent of the total electorate voted in favor of Pakistan. Frontier Congress leaders were advised to abandon their alliance with the Patels and

¹ Khan Abdul Jabbar Khan, famously known as Dr. Khan Sahib, was the elder brother of Bacha Khan. During the Partition of India, he served as the Chief Minister of the North-West Frontier Province. In 1954, he was appointed as the Minister of Communications in the central cabinet. From 1955 to 1957, he served as the Chief Minister of Bengal (present-day Bangladesh) before resigning from the post. He was assassinated in 1958.

Gandhis, join the Muslim League, and take on the huge task of rebuilding the Pathan community. However, the Khudai Khidmatgars saw the referendum as a “farce” and a “one-sided” process. Dr. Khan Sahib claimed that fake votes were cast, including votes of Congress members and their families without their presence. Since the electoral roll had not been updated for a long time, even the votes of deceased individuals were counted. Interestingly, some prominent League leaders confirmed allegations of rigging and other fraudulent practices nearly forty years after the event. (Shah, 2015). On August 14, the Indian subcontinent was partitioned, and Pakistan emerged as a new country on the world map.

Bacha Khan and Pakistan

On August 14, 1947, Pakistan was established. Under these altered circumstances, on September 3–4, the Khudai Khidmatgar movement and its affiliated groups held a meeting at Sardaryab near Peshawar, where they pledged allegiance to the newly created state of Pakistan. On September 2 and 3, Bacha Khan raised the demand for a “Pashtunistan” as an autonomous state within Pakistan. (Huma, 2013). They accepted Pakistan as their homeland. (Koreejo, 1993) After the partition, the Khan brothers adjusted their stance according to the prevailing circumstances and reconciled with the newly created state. They declared that by “independent Pashtunistan” they did not intend the establishment of a separate state; rather, their objective was to ensure complete autonomy for the North-West Frontier Province, while remaining an integral unit of Pakistan (Azad, 1959). On February 23, 1948, in the session of Pakistan’s Constituent Assembly held in Karachi, Bacha Khan participated and there he took formally the oath of allegiance to Pakistan. Jinnah was pleased with this positive gesture of Bacha Khan and invited him for a meal. During the meeting, Bacha Khan requested Jinnah to visit the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and meet with the Khudai Khidmatgars. Jinnah accepted this proposal (Shah, Abdul Ghaffar Khan, ?). In April 1948, when Jinnah came to Peshawar, he declined to go to Sardaryab, the headquarters of the Khudai Khidmatgars, and instead asked Bacha Khan to come to Peshawar. Bacha Khan complied and met Jinnah there.

In 1948, on the 5th of March, he delivered a speech in Urdu before the National Assembly. In the same month, Bacha Khan established a party under the name *Awami Party*, in which Abdul Samad Khan Achakzai, Abdul Majid Sindhi, G. M. Syed, and Sheikh Hishamuddin were also his companions. Bacha Khan was unanimously elected as the president of this party (Huma, 2013). This organization emerged as the first political group in opposition to the Muslim League in Pakistan. It initiated resistance against the League government’s excesses and extremism. Upon his return from Karachi, Bacha Khan resolved to propagate the party’s cause throughout Pakistan; however, he was arrested near Kohat and sentenced to three years of rigorous imprisonment (Shah, Abdul Ghaffar Khan, ?) After his release from prison, he resumed efforts against the government’s One Unit policy. They demanded provincial autonomy within Pakistan, a demand that had also been highlighted in the Lahore Resolution of 1940. However, the

government opposed this demand and imprisoned most of the leaders advocating for provincial autonomy. According to the original text of the Lahore Resolution, the central government was to exercise authority only over defense, foreign affairs, communications, and financial matters, while all other powers would remain with the provinces. The Resolution emphasized that Pakistan required strong provinces, not a strong central authority. To achieve this objective, Bacha Khan adopted the path of nonviolence. In 1957, he, along with other colleagues, established a new political party in Dhaka, called the National Awami Party, with one of its key objectives being opposition to the One Unit policy. Subsequently, Bacha Khan was repeatedly imprisoned by the Pakistani government and later released. By the late 1960s, he gradually withdrew from active politics. His health deteriorated, and he frequently traveled to different countries, spending most of his time in Afghanistan. In 1978, he went to Afghanistan and began writing his book, *Zama Zhwand Jadd-o-Jehad* (“My Life and Struggle”). Bacha Khan passed away on January 20, 1988, at Lady Reading Hospital in Peshawar and was laid to rest in Jalalabad.

Bacha Khan spent fifteen years in British Indian prisons to secure independence from the colonial government. Before independence, he fought alongside the Indian National Congress for a united India. After the creation of Pakistan, he spent another fifteen years in Pakistani prisons with the goal of establishing a province that would retain its distinct identity, be named Pashtunistan, and enjoy equal rights alongside other provinces. One of Bacha Khan’s aspirations was to rename the North-West Frontier Province as Pashtunistan; in a speech to the Pakistani Constituent Assembly, he argued that since every province in Pakistan has its own name, this province should have one as well. Bacha Khan stated: “We live in Pakistan as five brothers; the other provinces have names, but we do not. We tell the claimants of Islam to give us a name as well. One day, Liaquat Ali Khan told me in Parliament: ‘What is this Pashtunistan?’ I replied: ‘It is the name of our homeland.’ He asked, ‘What name?’ I said: ‘Like Bengal, Punjab, Sindh, and Balochistan. Our land has no name; we too should have a name like Pashtunistan.’ But the moment we took the name Pashtunistan, they immediately began propaganda, claiming that we would destroy Pakistan. But tell me, does Pakistan get destroyed by the names Punjab, Bengal, Sindh, or Balochistan? Will it be destroyed only by the name Pashtunistan?” (Khan B. , 1347)

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad writes: “India attained independence, but it lost its unity. The partition was a tragedy for India. We made great efforts to prevent the partition, but we failed. We must not forget that culturally we are one people and will remain so. Politically, we failed... we must acknowledge our political failure, but culturally, we are not separated.” (Azad, 1959) The nonviolent efforts of the Congress and the Khudai Khidmatgars were unable to preserve India’s unity. In the end, India was divided into two parts.

Conclusion

Bacha Khan’s social activities played a pivotal role in awakening the Pashtun community and raising their political consciousness.



He established schools and tirelessly worked to eradicate harmful customs among the Pashtuns. He actively participated in the Khilafat Movement. Through the establishment of the Khudai Khidmatgar movement, he promoted mutual cooperation and unity among the Pashtuns and worked to eliminate enmity and discord within the community.

In the political arena, before the Partition of India, he fought alongside the Indian National Congress for India's independence, enduring hardships and imprisonment. However, the Congress betrayed this commitment, and as he stated, "we were thrown to the wolves." Bacha Khan always considered India his homeland and never supported its partition. Yet, when the Congress accepted the Partition Plan, he raised the call for an independent Pashtunistan.

This call went unheard. After the referendum and the creation of Pakistan, Bacha Khan took an oath of allegiance to the new state, yet he continued his struggle for the rights of the Pashtuns within Pakistan. He spent seventy years of his life fighting for his people's rights through nonviolence, and thirty of his eighty-eight years were spent in prisons. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad writes: 'We attained independence, but we lost our unity.' Bacha Khan tirelessly struggled for freedom; however, his hopes for a united India, an independent Pashtunistan, and later an autonomous province within Pakistan were not fully realized. One of his major aspirations was to rename the North-West Frontier Province as Pashtunistan. He requested former Pakistani President Zia-ul-Haq to use the name 'Pashtunkhwa' instead of Pashtunistan for the province, but the request was denied. In 2010, the province was officially renamed Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

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