

Balasaheb Gangadhar Kher

(1888 - 1957)

Mumbai Legacy Project
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Balasaheb Gangadhar Kher was a freedom fighter, lawyer, politician and scholar who envisioned an educated society that understood the importance of nation-building. The city of Bombay readily absorbed his ambitious notions. Serving in the Constituent Assembly, he participated in discussions regarding the prohibition of intoxicants, the appointment of Governors and the right to equality. He was also a social reformer, working for the aboriginal tribes and the rights of women (The Constitution of India 2023). B. G. Kher Marg was named in his honour to commemorate his significant contributions to the country

He was born on 24th August 1888 in Ratnagiri. Although he spent his childhood in a small town named Kundgol, he went to Pune to study at the New English High School. His mentor was the social reformer Gopal Krishna Gokhale. He continued to pursue a Bachelor of Arts from Wilson College, where he received a high distinction and the Bhau Daji Lad award for excellent performance in Sanskrit. He qualified as a solicitor in 1918 and established the law firm Manilal Kher & Co., where he published the internationally recognised Bombay Law Journal in 1923. The work of Lokmanya Tilak and Mahatma Gandhi inspired him to join the freedom movement. He participated in major movements like the Non-Cooperation Movement, Salt Satyagraha and the Quit India Movement. He was undeterred by the arrests he faced as a consequence of the latter two movements (The Constitution of India 2023).

He first entered politics in 1922, when he was appointed the Secretary of the Bombay Branch of the Swarajya Party (The Hindu 1957). He quickly became a crucial part of the Maharashtra Congress as well, holding important positions like President of the Bombay Provincial Congress Committee and President Harijan Sevak Sangh Maharashtra. He was concerned about education, uplifting backward classes, sanitation and healthcare. He urged rural folk to create village congress committees to communicate their needs effectively (Times of India, 1938). He cared for the upliftment of the aboriginal tribes and called upon the citizens to contribute to their welfare. Kherwadi in Bandra East was named after him to honour his efforts and uplift the leather tanners who once lived there. In 1937, he was appointed the Prime Minister of the erstwhile Bombay Presidency. However, he soon resigned from his post to protest against the decision to send Indian troops to fight in the Second World War (Thomas et al., 2017).

He urged students not to abandon their studies to take to the streets. He asked them to discipline themselves, participate in the constructive activities organised by Mahatma Gandhi and adopt the principles of Swadeshi. He declared that no true revolutionary would continue to wear foreign cloth or revel in luxuries while poor people suffered. He was arrested from his residence on 21st November 1940 under Section 129 of the Defence of India Rules due to his antiwar campaigning. He bid farewell to his family, including his days-old granddaughter, collected a few books from his library and allowed himself to be detained with equanimity. Due to his arrest, the trade of stocks, shares, grains, cotton and seeds was halted in Bombay (The Times of India 1940).

He resumed his position as Prime Minister of the Bombay Presidency in 1946 and then became the first Chief Minister (Premier) of the Bombay State (Thomas et al., 2017). B. G. Kher recognised that India's declaration of independence was the beginning of a long journey. Ahead were years of hard work and great sacrifices required for nation-building, a key pillar of which was education. He warned the citizens against "dreams of a soft and comfortable existence" and urged them to cultivate a thirst for truth, impressing upon them that a nation is "sustained by the strength and inspiration of the body of learned men and women in its universities" (The Times of India 1947). He standardised the law program at Government Law College, Mumbai and helped establish the Poona University (now



known as Savitribai Phule Pune University) in 1949. One of the buildings on campus was named Kher Bhavan in his honour. He also chaired the Wardha Education Committee of the Central Advisory Board of Education in 1929 and recommended many reforms in education, including increased expenditure.

Kher proudly unfurled the Tricolour atop the Bombay Civil Secretariat (Koppikar, 2017). But independence came with its scruples; the partition spilt blood at the border and drove people further inland. When winter arrived and exacerbated the problems of the refugees in East Punjab, Delhi and other Northern states, Kher appealed to the people of Bombay, who were blessed with a more temperate climate, to donate warm clothing for them (The Times of India 1947). He promoted a feeling of oneness within the community, appealing to give up “internal dissensions based on language and different ways of living and live as one nation” (The Times of India 1952).

In 1952, he assumed the role of the High Commissioner in the U.K., succeeding Krishna Menon in acting as liaison to the Empire. In 1954, he was awarded the Padma Bhushan by the Government of India. He served as the chairman of the Gandhi Smarak Nidhi until he died in 1957. He considered it an honour to propagate the ideals of Gandhi, which he cherished above all. He passed away on 8th March 1957.



Ridge Road, which gets its name from connecting Malabar Hill to the rest of Mumbai, was renamed B. G. Kher Marg in his honour. It is a street of paramount importance as it connects the residence of the Governor of Maharashtra, the Raj Bhavan, with the residence of the Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Varsha Bungalow (Thomas et al., 2017). The street also offers access to Hanging Gardens, Kamala Nehru Park and a view of the Mumbai skyline. It is a street which connects important civil servants to the rest of the city. It housed intellectuals and changemakers like Kher, who led citizens towards an independent nation.

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