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Gopi Chand Bhargava: Punjab’s First Chief Minister

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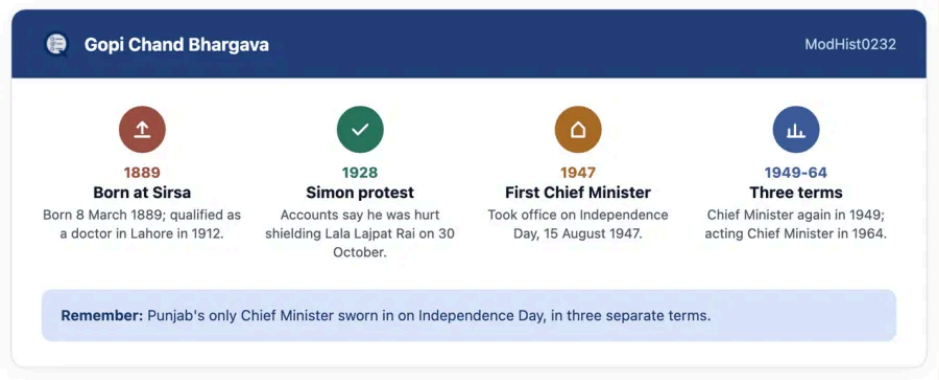
Gopi Chand Bhargava: Punjab’s First Chief Minister

On the very day India became free, Punjab got its first Chief Minister. He took the oath on 15 August 1947. The province he governed had just been cut in two.

That man was Gopi Chand Bhargava, a doctor who had left his clinic for the freedom struggle. His first job was not policy. It was to feed, house and settle refugees.



Gopi Chand Bhargava. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.



Four turning points in the life of Gopi Chand Bhargava.

> **Born.** 8 March 1889, Sirsa, undivided Punjab.
> **Trained as.** A doctor; M.B.B.S., Lahore, 1912.
> **First term.** 15 August 1947 to 13 April 1949.
> **Second term.** 18 October 1949 to 20 June 1951.
> **Third term.** Acting, June to July 1964.
> **Died.** 26 December 1966, aged 77.

Simon Commission: the 1928 British commission with no Indian member, which sparked protests.

Article 356: the provision that allows President's Rule in a state.

Acting Chief Minister: someone who runs the government for a short time.

1 Who was Gopi Chand Bhargava?

Gopi Chand Bhargava was born on 8 March 1889 in Sirsa. In his time Sirsa lay in undivided Punjab. Today it is in Haryana.

He trained as a doctor. In 1912 he earned his M.B.B.S. from Medical College, Lahore. In 1913 he began to practise medicine.

Lala Lajpat Rai's example drew him into public life. Accounts say he gave up his practice to join the Non-Cooperation Movement. That was a real sacrifice for a settled professional.

- Born **8 March 1889** at **Sirsa**.
- M.B.B.S. from **Medical College, Lahore**, **1912**.
- Began medical practice in **1913**.
- Left **medicine** for the freedom struggle.
- Read about Lala Lajpat Rai and the Non-Cooperation Movement.

> **Quick check 1.** Gopi Chand Bhargava was the first head of government of PEPSU. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

2 How did he fight for freedom?

The British first jailed him in January 1922. Accounts say the charge came under the Seditious Meeting Act. The sentence was four months and a fine of 300 rupees.

In 1928 the Simon Commission came to India. No Indian sat on it, and the country protested. Accounts say Bhargava helped lead the protest in Lahore.

On 30 October 1928 police charged the crowd with lathis. Accounts say Bhargava was hurt while shielding Lala Lajpat Rai from the blows. Lajpat Rai died of his injuries weeks later.

He led the Opposition in the Punjab Assembly from 1937 to 1940. During the Quit India Movement he served his longest jail term. Accounts put it at about two and a half years.

- First jailed in **January 1922**.
- Lathi charge in Lahore on **30 October 1928**.

- Opposition leader in the Punjab Assembly, **1937 to 1940**.
- Longest jail term during **Quit India**, about **two and a half years**.
- Read about the Simon Commission and the Quit India Movement.

3 How did he become Punjab’s first Chief Minister?

India became free on 15 August 1947. Punjab was divided between India and Pakistan. On that same day Bhargava was sworn in as Punjab’s first Chief Minister.

There was no calm start. Millions of people were crossing the new border in both directions. His government had to give them relief, shelter and work. That was the first big task.

His first term ended on 13 April 1949. Bhim Sen Sachar took over from him. The two leaders belonged to the same party, but they came from rival groups inside it.

- Sworn in on **15 August 1947**, Independence Day.
- First task: **refugee relief** and resettlement.
- First term ended **13 April 1949**.
- Followed by **Bhim Sen Sachar**.

> **Quick check 2.** Bhargava became Punjab's first Chief Minister on 15 August 1947. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

4 Why did he serve three terms?

Bhargava came back as Chief Minister on 18 October 1949. He served until 20 June 1951. His third spell was short. He acted as Chief Minister from 21 June to 6 July 1964.

These breaks show how unstable early Punjab politics was. Factions inside the Congress fought each other. Accounts say the quarrels between Bhargava's and Sachar's camps led to President's Rule in 1951.

That was the first use of Article 356 anywhere in India, say these accounts. The article lets the Centre take over a state when its government cannot work.

Punjab itself was later redrawn. The 1966 reorganisation created a smaller Punjab and a new Haryana. Bhargava died on 26 December 1966, the same year.

- Second term: **18 October 1949** to **20 June 1951**.
- Third term: **acting**, **June to July 1964**.
- **President's Rule** in **1951**, under **Article 356**.
- Died **26 December 1966**, aged **77**.
- Read about the 1966 reorganisation of Punjab.

5 Who else in his family served the cause?

His brother, Thakur Das Bhargava, was also a Congress leader. He was a lawyer and a freedom fighter. He sat in the Central Legislative Assembly for Ambala from 1926 to 1930.

Thakur Das founded a society called Vidya Pracharini Sabha. He also founded many schools and colleges. One of them was Fateh Chand College for Women at Hisar.

The two brothers show how freedom workers in Punjab also built schools and public bodies.

- Brother **Thakur Das Bhargava**, a lawyer and freedom fighter.
- Member for **Ambala**, **1926 to 1930**.
- Founded **Fateh Chand College for Women** at **Hisar**.

6 What are the exam traps?

Do not mix him up with the leader of the neighbouring state.

- Bhargava led **Punjab**; Rarewala led **PEPSU**.
- Three terms, and the third was only **acting**.
- He took office on **15 August 1947**, not on 26 January 1950.
- Do not confuse him with the scientist **Pushpa Bhargava**.

Remember: Bhargava became Punjab's first Chief Minister on Independence Day 1947. He served three separate terms, the last one acting.

Think it through: Why was taking office on Independence Day especially hard?

There was no time to prepare. Partition had just split the province. Millions of refugees needed help at once, and the new government had to build its machinery as it worked.

Quick check 3. Bhargava served three full, consecutive terms as Chief Minister. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Practice MCQs

1. On 15 August 1947, Gopi Chand Bhargava became the first Chief Minister of which state, on the very day of independence?

A. Bihar

B. Madhya Pradesh

C. Punjab

D. Uttar Pradesh

See answer ↓

2. On 30 October 1928, Gopi Chand Bhargava was injured shielding which leader from a police lathi charge in Lahore?

A. Madan Mohan Malaviya

B. Lala Lajpat Rai

C. Lala Hardayal

D. Bhagat Singh

See answer ↓

3. Before joining the freedom movement, Gopi Chand Bhargava had trained and practised in which profession?

A. Journalism

B. Medicine

C. Law

D. Engineering

See answer ↓

4. How many separate, non-consecutive terms did Gopi Chand Bhargava serve as Chief Minister of Punjab?

A. One

B. Four

C. Two

D. Three

See answer ↓

5. Gopi Chand Bhargava's government, formed on Punjab's independence day, faced what as its very first task in office?

A. Drafting Punjab's first state budget

B. Managing the massive refugee movement from Partition

C. Negotiating the state's new capital city

D. Organising the state's first general election

See answer ↓

6. On which date did Gopi Chand Bhargava begin his second term as Chief Minister of Punjab?

A. 15 August 1947

B. 18 October 1949

C. 13 April 1949

D. 20 June 1951

See answer ↓

7. From which college did Gopi Chand Bhargava earn his M.B.B.S. degree in 1912?

A. Grant Medical College, Bombay

B. King George Medical College

C. Medical College, Lahore

D. Calcutta Medical College

See answer ↓

8. Which women's college at Hisar was among the institutions founded by Gopi Chand Bhargava's brother Thakur Das Bhargava?

A. Lady Shri Ram College

B. Fateh Chand College for Women

C. Miranda House

D. Isabella Thoburn College

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **C.** He became Punjab's first Chief Minister on 15 August 1947, immediately facing a refugee crisis from Partition. ↑ Q1
2. **B.** He was injured shielding Lala Lajpat Rai during the anti-Simon Commission protest in Lahore. ↑ Q2
3. **B.** He completed his M.B.B.S. at Medical College, Lahore, in 1912, before giving up practice for politics. ↑ Q3
4. **D.** Bhargava served three separate terms as Chief Minister: 1947-1949, 1949-1951, and briefly again as acting Chief Minister in 1964. ↑ Q4
5. **B.** His government's first task was managing the massive refugee movement between newly divided East and West Punjab. ↑ Q5
6. **B.** His first term ran from 15 August 1947 to 13 April 1949. He returned on 18 October 1949 and served until 20 June 1951. ↑ Q6
7. **C.** Bhargava completed his M.B.B.S. at Medical College, Lahore, in 1912. He began medical practice in 1913. ↑ Q7
8. **B.** Thakur Das Bhargava, a freedom fighter and lawyer, founded several schools and colleges. These included Fateh Chand College for Women at Hisar. ↑ Q8

Quick-check answers

1. **False.** ↑ 1
2. **True.** ↑ 2
3. **False.** ↑ 3

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