



RESEARCH ARTICLE

PUNJABI WOMEN IN FREEDOM STRUGGLE: AN OVERVIEW

*Dr. Hardev Kaur

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Sant Baba Bhag Singh University, Khiala

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*Corresponding author:

Dr. Hardev Kaur

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ABSTRACT

An attempt in this paper has been made to reconstruct the role of Punjabi women who took active part in the freedom struggle to make India stand stronger for her freedom. The purpose of this article to assess the role of women in the freedom struggle of the Punjab from 1900-1947. It was the period when the social set-up in India was marked by backwardness, orthodoxy, conservatism and traditionalism. The Punjabi women played an activist role in Swadeshi Movement, Rowlatt Act Agitation, Gadhar Movement, Gandhian non-violent movements as well as in revolutionary movements to liberate India. There is an effort to bring some of them into limelight that fought dedicatedly for the freedom of country from Punjab. Though some of these women were less educated but had such a marvelous understanding that when they got an opportunity to prove their might and caliber, they did not lag behind.

INTRODUCTION

It would be no exaggeration to state that the History of India is rich with the contributions made by many women of eminence from time to time in various fields of human activity. Their courageous deeds and notable accomplishments have been well recognized. In the modern period, particularly since the beginning of the struggle for freedom a considerable number of women have made remarkable contributions in this prolonged and unique fight for India's freedom and have left indelible marks of their achievements.ⁱ The soil of the Punjab has been the cradle of two ancient civilizations; Indus Valley Civilization and the Vedic Civilization. In the Indus Valley Civilization the cult of mother goddess prevailed and in the Vedic Civilization women enjoyed equal status. They had been actively involved in the political affairs.ⁱⁱ One of the best ways to understand the spirit of a civilization and to appropriate its excellences and realize its limitations is to study the history of the position and status of women in it. Civilization to great extent is the result of a society's capacity to control some of the strongest and most selfish impulses imbedded in the human nature.ⁱⁱⁱ Women did not take part in the freedom struggle in earlier period as they had to fight against inhuman vices like female infanticide, child marriage, *sati*, illiteracy and *pardah* system from 1850 to 1900. Their plight was taken up by reformers of Kuka Movement, Singh Sabha Movement, Arya Samaj etc.^{iv} The story behind the participation of women in the

Freedom Struggle Movement in Punjab state starts right back from the first half of 20th century.^v As the 20th century came, a new light of political struggle against British regime emerged.^{vi} In a monthly magazine 'Pritam', a message was given by Chaman Lal, B.A. Barriester Member of Legislative Assembly: Punjab to the women of state. This message was to bring motivational feelings in the women of Punjab. He hoped to see the women of Punjab like leading women of other provinces, and teaching the lesson of cleanliness, sound health, bravery and good moral character to all. This particular time was the rule of British government in India. He wanted to see the women of the state declaring 'Jehad'-a holy war against the injustice done by British government in India. The women of Punjab were highly affected from this incentive so they actively participated in the freedom struggle movement. This was the time when the women of Punjab equally joined the movement of the freedom. In the province of Punjab both national and international politics affected the regional politics of the state. The state was more oriented for the strengthening of women since the struggle against the British rule began. The participation of the women of Punjab in the freedom struggle movement can exactly be traced from 1900 onwards. At the same time the women were leading the country for the freedom of our Nation.^{vii} Participation of women on National level at this particular time was also inspired from 'Satyagrah' movement which was initiated by Mahatma Gandhi. He wanted the Women to join the struggle for freedom at appropriate time. The women were highly inspired by the

motivational speeches of our national leaders. This was the time when the women of Punjab equally joined the movement of the freedom of our country.^{viii} The women of Punjab now were found participating in our various National Movements. The women after this began to take interest in the politics and actively participated in Anti Partition agitation of Bengal in 1905, Agrarian and Ghadar Movement of 1907 and 1913. In Punjab the Swadeshi and Boycott Movement with certain local variations forms a protest, as manifestation of unrest gained impetus during the concluding months of 1905. Smt. Sushila Devi of Sialkot delivered a series of lectures in which she attacked the government and exhorted the women to rise to the occasion.^{ix} Hari Devi, wife of Roshan Lal, Barriester of Lahore, who was a great social reformer and editor of a Hindi Magazine 'The Bharat Bhagini', also joined the ranks of the political workers. During this period, she arranged meetings and collected funds for the purpose of assisting anarchists under trial.^x Smt. Purani who was working for the Arya Samaj at Hissar was a prominent worker of the time. Agayavati in Delhi was another person who took interest in the movement. She addressed both men and women and described the part played by the women in the management of the affairs of their own country in former times and she urged that until women were educated and took interest in the welfare of the country there was little chance of India making any real progress. Agayavati started a Vidhwa Ashram where widows and other women, without distinction of cast or creed, received political training and were taught to preach as she was doing.^{xi}

Sarla Devi was one of the prominent personalities of this period. She formed the link between Punjab and Bengal. She opened 'Lakshmi Bhandar' for popularizing Swadeshi goods. In 1904 she won the gold medal for exhibiting improved kinds of textures. She was married to a popular Arya Samajist and a well-known Nationalist leader, Ram BhajDutt Chaudhary of Lahore in 1905 and her center of activities was then shifted from Bengal to Punjab. Sarla Devi gave a new life to the "Suhrid Samiti" in 1905. She organized the "Suhrid Samiti" as an instrument for political work and tried to infuse a martial spirit into the members by introducing religious rituals. The Association had its headquarters in Mymen Singh and they aimed at propagating and starting new centers. In 1908 it had six branches in Mymen Singh, four in Dacca and six in sylet and once each in Noakhali and Chandernpur. The Brati Samiti and Sakti Samiti of Calcutta and one Sevak Samiti of Dacca were also branches of same society. It was reported in 1908 that Mrs. Ram BhojDutt "Maintains a fairly brisk correspondence with the leading members of this Samiti. Sarla Devi toured extensively, more especially the Punjab. She opened the Arya Samaj Branches for women. Addressing a meeting at the Arya Samaj Girls School, Saharanpur, she said that," Knowledge is the great remedy for fear, Give knowledge to your women folk. Get them rid of fear and they will transmit fearlessness to your veins." Sarla Devi came under the influence of Gandhi Ji in the year 1919. She was one of the few women in Punjab who raised their voice against tyranny of General Dyer. Sarla Devi remained an ardent Congress worker till her death in 1945 and participated in the various campaigns launched to achieve freedom.^{xii} Bai Amman was from aristocratic Muslim family. Addressing a meeting at Lahore she said the Indians have committed two follies during the last 150 years: it was they who sided with the British which brought about the capture of their own king and secondly they helped the English during the outbreak of 1857. If Indians had not done so there was no possibility of these "merchants"

getting supremacy in India and shackling Indians in the fetters of serdom. "Would They" she continued "commit another folly and put their aged mother to shame." "Be man" she added, "and carry out the determination you have formed."^{xiii}

In another meeting in the Punjab, Bhai Amman said the some people left houses or ornaments to their children after death, but she was of the opinion that that there was nothing as good as freedom and asked women to leave Swaraj after their death for children.^{xiv} The women of the Punjab actively participated in the Revolutionary Movement. Bibi Gulab Kaur Bakhshiwala played leading role in the Ghadar activities from 1914-1916 in Punjab. Bibi Jas Kaur Jhar Sahib also played the significant role in the Ghadar Movement.^{xv} In revolutionary movement Durga Bhabhi played a pioneer role. She was wife of Bhagwati Charan Vohra. He was a Revolutionary. Durga Bhabhi too got to attract this mission. Chander Shekhar Azad, Raj Guru, Bhatukeshwar Dutt, Bhagat Singh regularly visited their home. On 17th December, 1928 after killing Saundrus, Sukhdev and Bhagat Singh reached her house, she helped them to escape from the vigilant eyes of 500 armed policemen in the Calcutta mail. This shows her valour and courage.^{xvi}

Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur-A Nation loving patriot belonged to royal family of Kapurthala. In 1919 due to Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, she started working for Congress and left luxurious life in 1934, she started living in Gandhi's Ashrama.^{xvii} The women of Punjab inaugurated the Civil Disobedience Movement by taking out a procession of five thousand ladies at Lahore in 1930. Processions, meetings, picketing and prabhatpheries in defiance of Section 144 became their daily routine. Day after day they held demonstrations before the gates of the Council Chamber. The police and their lathi chargers had ceased to scare them. When the Viceroy came to address the Council Chamber they shouted slogans like "Long Live Bhagat Singh," "Gandhi Ji Ki Jai". The life and the soul of the movement were Mrs. Lado Rani Zutshi, Parvati, daughter of Lala Lajpat Rai, Smt. Kartar Kaur, Atma Devi and many others.^{xviii}

Women took active part in *Hartals*, Meetings and processions. In order to arouse the public, sometimes women delivered seditious speeches for which they were convicted under section 124-A and 153-A of the Indian Penal Code. Smt. Lado Rani Zutshi was convicted for delivering such antigovernment speeches. As during Civil Disobedience Movement all Congress organizations declared unlawful. Under such circumstances, as usual, all the Congress Committees were dissolved and their place was taken by the War Councils and dictators were appointed to carry out the programme effectively. The highlight of the movement was that a number of women were appointed dictators at several places in Punjab. At Lahore' Swadesh Kumari, daughter of Lala Pindi Dass was appointed (6th Dictator) of the Lahore region. Smt. Ganga Devi, (6th dictator), and Smt. Bhagwati (7th dictator) of the War Council of Amritsar Area, Smt. Anand Kumari (6th dictator), and Smt. Kaushalya Devi (7th dictator), of the War Council of Okara. Smt. Luxmi Trikha (8th dictator of Jhang War Council), Durga Devi (1st dictator) of Kasur, Sohni Devi, dictator of Hissar side, Mohini devi in Bhiwani, Pritam devi (11th dictator) of Lahore War Council, Dharm Kaur (16th) and Mrs. Gopi Chand (14th) dictators of Punjab Congress, Shanta Devi (20th dictator), Kaushalya Devi (22nd dictator), Sushila Devi (25th dictator), Sita Devi (33rd dictator), Durga Devi (25th dictator) and Vidyavati (35th dictator). A total of 19 women were

appointed as dictators at various places at Punjab.^{xix} About 25 women were arrested from the Punjab by 31st January, 1932. The highest sentence awarded to Vidyavati was two years' rigorous imprisonment under section 17(1) of the Cr. L.A.A. The highest number of convictions of women political prisoners under various laws and Ordinances was 45 in the Month of March 1932. The total number of convictions of women from January 1932 to December 1932 was 121 and fines realized from them amounted to Rs. 3050.^{xx}

A number of women enlisted themselves for offering *Satyagraha*. Sarla Prashar was the first Sevika from the area of Doaba, who was given permission to offer *Satyagraha*. Smt. Bhag Devi also took the initiative of offering *Satyagraha* but arrested. The second phase of the movement aroused little enthusiasm in the beginning but picked up momentum in the following months. Women of the region courted arrest. They were given harsh treatment. Some were awarded sentences ranging from one month to one year. The third phase of the movement was initiated by Smt. Savitri Devi in March, 1941. She was convicted under rule 38 and 121 D.I.R. and sentenced to six months' imprisonment for raising Antiwar slogans. Similarly, Smt. Sita Devi, Smt. Chander Devi and Smt. Sohag Rani were arrested and imprisoned. During Quit India Movement the women leaders of all the communities came together to through away the foreign yoke. The women leaders participated in the camps organized by the Congress where lectures on social, political and economic issues were delivered. Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur faced lathi charge atleast, fifteen times during this movement. These brave and courageous women participated in almost all the activities ranging from distribution of pamphlets of top running secret presses. They worked as message couriers. They also proved that the underground activities were not the monopoly of men only. As Khadi was one of the constructive programme of the Quit India Movement, the rural women participated in a large number. Women like Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Sarla Devi Choudharani, Bhag Devi, Satyavati, Pushpa Gujral and Gauran Devi did not lag behind couriers and put their heart and soul into the spinning movement. Even an Irish woman, Freeda Bedi, wife of B.P.L. Bedi of Gurdaspur, took her *Charkha* to the women's cell at Lahore when she was under detention during the *Satyagraha* Movement. The communal harmony was the other remarkable item in the Constructive Programme. Several efforts were made to preserve unity among the two communities. Sarla Devi Choudharani, Amtu Salam, Rameshwari Nehru, Parkash Kaur, Luxmi Trikha and Bhag Devi also played an important role in forging Hindu-Muslim unity.^{xxi} When communal riots broke out in many areas of the country particularly during the partition period, the women of the Punjab were asked to help the affected people and make arrangements for the repatriation and rehabilitation of the abducted girls. Many camps were organized and women were given training of Ram Sevika. Some of these leaders were sent to Pakistan for the repatriation of abducted girls. Among them were Sarla Prashar, Luxmi Trikha, Luxmi Arya, Parkash Kaur, Amtu Salam and Savitri Devi Sharma. Women like Gauran Devi, Sarla Prashar, Pushpa Gujral, Vidyawati and Mehender Kaur organized camps for the shelter of these riot-affected people and also collected clothes and funds for them. Savitri Devi Sharma said that about 40,000 girls were brought back from Pakistan. These observations clearly show that Punjabi women took keen interest and made remarkable contribution to the Constructive Programme of Gandhi.^{xxii}

CONCLUSION

Consequently, we can see that the story of the freedom of our nation as well as states has been the journey of extremely long course, which could never be achieved without the collaboration of the strongest part of the society i.e. women. Not only at National point but also in each and every state and province was led by the freedom fighters with their collaboration of females. This was perhaps the strongest part in the freedom of our nation. The women of Punjab were taking lead in freedom struggle in Punjab in spite of all the impediments in their path. So, we can say that the freedom struggle movement was initially a story that could never be complete without the active participation of women from each and every home. The women activists of Punjab played a leading role in the freedom of the state.^{xxiii} Their participation, in fact, had given moral strength to the movement. Whenever and wherever they were given any opportunity, they undoubtedly exhibited their courage and strength. They also proved that the political activities were not the monopoly of men alone.

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