

Role of Women of Punjab in the freedom struggle of India from 1940-42

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Abstract

The Punjab has always remained a battle ground for martial races and dynasties. The land of five rivers even faced foreign invasions from the north western provinces. In 1849 the province of Punjab came under the influence of the British. The policies, rules and regulations of the British government of India led an influence on the people of the provinces. The educational changes brought up by the government made people aware about their rights as they got influenced by the nations in other parts of the world. Socio-religious reformers of India tried to revive the traditional values of the society, simultaneously focusing on the reformative ideas. This brought change in the ideology and thought process of the Indians and started to advocate the importance of independent India. Mahatma came to India in 1914 and he initiated 3 major movements in India for attaining freedom from the British- Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience and lastly Quit India Movement. In this research paper a focus will be laid on the contribution of women of Punjab during the Individual Satyagraha and Quit India Movement. Women of Punjab left no stone unturned to participate in these movements and even went to jails with their male counterparts.

Keywords: *Warring races, ahimsa, women's public participation, Individual Satyagraha, Quit India Movement.*

Aims and Objectives:

1. To study the contribution of women of Punjab in the Individual Satyagraha.
2. To study the contribution of women in the Quit India Movement.
3. To analyze the impact of women as the active participants of movements in the freedom struggle of India.
4. To critically discuss how women came out of their households and stood with their fellow counterparts for the sake of their nation.

Introduction:

Punjab, the land of five rivers, has been the battlefield of warring races and dynasties more than any other part of India. It has always been an important part of India, and its people, known for their vigor and energy have been made significant contribution to the country's struggle for freedom. In fact Punjab was second to none in its passionate urge and efforts for getting freedom from the Britishers. The freedom struggle in the Punjab presents the spectrum of promoting a popular participation.¹ The Both men and women participated actively and passively in the freedom struggle movement of India. People from all fields and phases of life irrespective of age, gender, creed, caste and creed jumped into the struggle and contributed notably in the struggle for freedom of India.

Any movement can be successful only if it is led by a strong leader. So the freedom movement witnessed the leadership of many strong personalities like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai, Bhagat Singh and many more. Mahatama Gandhi was the one most important and popular leader who played a major role in the national movement in India. He led three main movements viz. Non - Cooperation (1920-22), Civil Disobedience movement (1930-34) and Quit India Movement (1942) in India to attain independence for the nation from the British. He was successful in mobilizing masses in his movements. He led his movements on the principle of *ahimsa* or non-violence.

The Gandhian ideology portrayed the struggle against the British as a moral battle, in which the moral and spiritual of Indian women was supreme. Gandhi constructed a moral stance which cut across class, communitarian and rural – urban differences to create an anti-imperialist front. Metamorphically, the streets were viewed by men and women as moral battlefields, and consequently they were seen as an acceptable location for women's activities. This ideology assisted women in stepping

¹Fauja Singh, Eminent Freedom Fighters of Punjab, Punjabi University, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1972, p.1.

over the thresholds of their homes for the first time. Women's public participation also helped to dispel British stereotypes of their downtrodden and degenerate status.²

Gandhi expected women to contribute to the political cause primarily from within the domestic sphere through their roles as supportive wives and mothers. The concept of swadeshi (indigenous) was aligned with the political liberation of the country.³ Like salt, he used another ordinary item, the charkha or spinning wheel, to ignite the imagination of the masses, and politicized and popularized this domestic object at both the national and local levels. It was possible for women to contribute to the nationalist movement from within the domestic sphere since Gandhi had articulated that 'every act counted'.⁴

In the 1940s almost every part of India witnessed an increased number of women participants in the movements for the freedom struggle of India and Punjab was no exception to it. The women of Punjab not only stepped out of their houses and at many places while leading the movements they courted arrests along with their male counterparts for the sake of their motherland.

On 3rd September 1939, the Prime Minister of Great Britain Neville Chamberlain, declared that his country was at War with Germany. On the same day, the Governor General of India, Lord Linlithgow, declared that India was also a belligerent state. At the same time the Governor General promulgated several ordinances, including the Defense of India Rules (D.I.R). The Government acquired extraordinary powers for the effective prosecution of war and for maintaining law and order. It could prohibit public meetings and processions, control and suppress anti-war propaganda, detain any individual without trial and transport him for life.⁵ On 8 August, 1940 the Governor General came with the August Offer which promised the expansion of Executive council of the Governor General with more Indians as its members. In return

²Saruchi Thapar-Bajorkert, *Women in the National Movement: Unseen Faces and Unheard Voices, 1930-42*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2006. Pp.91-92.

³*Ibid*, p.181.

⁴Geraldine Fobres, *The New Cambridge History of India : Women in Modern India*, New Delhi, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 121.

⁵Verinder Grover (ed), *Political Parties and Party System: Political System Constitution of India*, Deep and Deep publications, New Delhi, 1997, p.301

Indians were expected to help the British during the World War Second. But the offer was acceptable to the political parties of India except the Muslim League.

So the Congress party came out with a programme of Individual Satyagraha in October 1940 under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, keeping in view two main objectives: First to save the prestige of the Congress; Second, to win over the people, and “to supply with Congress with a programme which keep its alive and restore its prestige.” Ofcourse without causing any harm to its unity.⁶It was to “carry on non-violently and openly anti-war propaganda” and “to preach non-cooperation with the government in their war efforts.”⁷ Gandhi even appealed to women to participate and he expected more women thanmen.⁸Vinoba Bhave was chosen by Mahatma Gandhi as the first individual satyagrahi meaning an individual to take stand for Truth instead of collective action against the British. He initiated this campaign on 17thOctober 1940 and along with him about thirty thousand men and women courted arrest.

The members of the Congress were made to take permission from Mahatma Gandhi to enroll for the Individual Satyagraha. Some provinces had large participation of the people and some had less. The province of Punjab had sometimes more active members and sometimes less members were there to offer Individual Satyagraha. In the case of women, only a few women of prominence were chosen by Gandhi and were given the right to offer Satyagraha. Like Shanno Devi, ShrimatiRameshwari Devi and others were not allowed by Gandhi to court arrest and instead were asked to participate in the constructiveprogramme.So Mahatma Gandhi was selective in choosing the participants. They were made to enter either individual satyagraha or sometimes participation in constructive programmes was encouraged.

In Punjab, Satyagraha was initiated by Mian Iftikhar-ud-din, President, Punjab Provincial Congress Committee on 25th November, 1940 and he went to visit Gandhi in Wardha.⁹Following the leader Mahatma Gandhi, women of Punjab also showed their

⁶*Ibid*, p.304

⁷Manmohan Kaur, *Role of Women in the Freedom Movement (1857-1947)*, New Delhi, Sterling Publishers, 1968, p.96.

⁸*The Tribune*, Lahore, 19 November, 1940, p.13.

⁹*Ibid*, 24 November, 1940 , p. 7 .

active participation. Bibi Raghbir Kaur, member of the Legislative assembly Punjab started Satyagraha on 8th December 1940.¹⁰ A zeal to follow Gandhi was evident in the province of Punjab. People were not scared of the consequences of the Satyagraha and were ready to go to jails as well.

A Series of arrests were done by the government irrespective of gender during this Satyagraha movement under the Defense of India Rules. 'On 5 December, 1940, Mrs. Duni Chand, Member Legislative Assembly of Punjab from the Lahore Women constituency was the woman who was arrested in the Punjab at Lahore.¹¹ Another woman who offered Satyagraha was Mrs. Bediwife of Mr. B.P.L. Bedi. She was a graduate of the Oxford University and was heading the department of English in the Fateh Chand College for women in Lahore.¹² Similarly, Amar Kaur, wife of Mohan Lal advocate of Gurdaspur offered Satyagraha at Kasur in Lahore district and was arrested and later released in September 1942.¹³ One woman named Pushpa Gujral who was from Jhelum was given jail imprisonment of six months imprisonment for offering Satyagraha.¹⁴ Shrimati Vidya Kumari from Lahore, Shrimati Parvati Devi from Kamalia, Shrimati Kasturi Bai of Rohtak, two women from Ludhiana - Shrimati Puran Devi and Shrimati Savitri Devi, Ferozepur's Chandar Wati and many other ladies also came forward and actively participated in the movement of Individual Satyagraha.¹⁵

Sucheta Majumdar Kriplani who was born in Ambala, Punjab and completed her studies from the province of Punjab and Delhi actively participated. She was married to Acharaya Kriplani of Allahabad and she was chosen to organize women's wing of the Indian National Congress in 1940.¹⁶ This Women's wing was the department which used to work for raising the political consciousness of women and identify Congress with social change that benefited women. Active women leaders were made to aware other women to participate in the movements.

¹⁰*Ibid*, 29 November, 1940, p. 1.

¹¹*Ibid*, 6 December, 1940, p.2.

¹²*Ibid*, 7 December, 1940, p.2.

¹³*Ibid*, 30 September, 1940, p.9.

¹⁴Manmohan Kaur, *Role of Women in the Freedom Movement (1857-1947)*, p. 22.

¹⁵Manju Verma, *Role of Women in the Freedom Movement in Punjab*, New Delhi, Abhijeet Publications, 2003, pp.122-126.

¹⁶Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, p.208

Numerous women offered Satyagraha and were arrested during the Individual Satyagraha led by Mahatma Gandhi from October 1940 to December 1941. These number women satyagrahis was exponentially increasing every day. New members were enrolled in the Congress every day. By the month of April, the total strength of the Congress members enrolled in the Punjab was One lakh thirteen thousand two hundred and seventy seven. Among them four thousand two hundred and fifty six were women Congress members.¹⁷ Hence they actively participated in the programmes of the Congress.

After the individual Satyagraha of Mahatma, another historic movement led by Gandhi was Quit India Movement. He for almost three years advocated the policy of not seriously embarrassing a Britain at war, he decided, in the summer of 1942, that Congress should ask the British, to, simply, Quit India. The call was Gandhi's answer to events threatening everything he had built and hoped for.¹⁸

Finally on 8th August 1942, the All India Congress Committee in its historic session at Bombay, ratified the "Quit India" resolution of 14th July 1942 which was passed at Wardha by the Congress working committee by an overwhelming majority.¹⁹ After that Gandhi gave a call to all the Indians to begin to feel that they are free. And he asked teachers and students to be ready to get out of their cocoons to work and study in an independent nation.

Prominent women leaders came forward and sent memorandums to the British Government of India to look into the issues of political demands of the independence of India. 'Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur along with Rameshwari Nehru and Aruna Asaf Ali, representing the All India Women's conference appealed to the government to settle the problem of India's political demand of independence and quit India.'²⁰ Not only the women were appealing but they were also in forefront in showing their resentment against the British government. A trusted lieutenant of Gandhiji, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur took up the task of the uplift of women on her shoulders and was very active during

¹⁷*Ibid*, March 9, 1941, p.5.

¹⁸Rajmohan Gandhi, *Punjab: A History from Aurangzeb to Mountbatten*, Rupa Publications India, New Delhi, 2013, pp. 320-321.

¹⁹*The Tribune*, 9 August, Lahore, p.132.

²⁰*Ibid*, 17 August, 1942, p.8.

the Quit India movement in 1942.²¹ She led processions day after day. One procession was subjected to ruthless lathi charge in Simla. From 9 August to 16 August the processions led by her were subject to lathi charge fifteen times.²²

Hence, during the Quit India movement of 1942, Shrimati Lajyawati (Mrs. Hemraj), Shrimati Lakshmi Devi (Mrs. Om Prakash Trikha), Smt. Savitri Devi (Mrs. Ram Krishan), who it was stated held a demonstration in Anarkali on 26 August by raising Congress slogan and singing national songs were arrested at Lahore by the police while they marched with the national flag. Shrimati Satyawati wife of Achint Ram was also there and got arrested along with her son and twelve year old daughter.²³ Another Congress lady worker of Lahore, Shrimati Parbati Devi was also arrested on the same day.²⁴

Almost all prominent women of Punjab came in forefront and were participating actively in the Quit India movement. Rameshwari Nehru, former president of the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) was at that time presiding the Central Punjab branch of the AIWC and the Vice president of the Punjab Harijan Sewak Sang was also put into jail on 29 August.²⁵ And later she was released on 31 August, 1942 with restrictions on her movement.²⁶

Under the able guidance of Mahatma Gandhi, the women of Punjab further organised spontaneous hartals and demonstrations in several cities of the province to protest against the Britishers. The young girls were also not lagging behind. In Amritsar, about three dozen young college girls hoisted the tri-colour flag as a mark of 'Gandhi Jayanti' celebrations in Chowk Phuharawala on October 2, 1942. They also took out a procession. But the police reached there and to disperse the crowd, the police lathi charged and removed the girls to some unknown place. The arrested girls were let off after few hours of detention.²⁷ Women of all ages were active in this movement in

²¹ *Personalities : A Comprehensive and Authentic Biographical Dictionary of Men who Matter in India*, New Delhi, Arunam and Sheel Publishers, p.25.

²² Manmohan Kaur, *Role of Women in the Freedom Movement*, pp. 218,219.

²³ *The Tribune*, 27 August, 1942, p.5.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p.5.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 30 August, 1942, p.5.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 1 September, 1942, p.9.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 4 October, 1942, p.9.

the province of Punjab. This movement witnessed regular hartals and the schools and colleges were shut. Even the government restrictions as of banning any public gatherings, still the processions and hartals were visible in every nook and corner of the Punjab. Numerous magazines, pamphlets, newspapers and means of literary sources were distributed which showcased the information was anti-government in nature.

Furthermore the women of Punjab also started to make secret activities as they wanted to evade arrests. So many underground organizations run by men and women sprang up during this period. Even the literary pieces mentioning the wrong policies of the government were published secretly. 'Smt. Subhadra Joshi was one of them who undertook the work of editing a cyclostyled paper *Hamara Sangram*. This paper was published in Hindi from Delhi. She became target of the C.I.D. officials and was later arrested.²⁸ Luxmi Arya of Rohtak was also involved in the underground activities. She joined these underground political activities after taking leave from her school. She went from place to place and carried the message of the Congress from door to door hiding at her personal risk to avoid detention, so that movement could be kept alive outside the jail among the masses.²⁹

The government also treated the women in the same manner as they were treating the male. Arrests of the political active women leaders made and harsh treatment was done to them which was far from satisfaction. Pattabhi Sitaramayya, one of important leader of the Congress stated, "The treatment with women was not good and this is a tale that the nation would never forget."³⁰

Rajkumari Amrit Kaur when arrested at Kalka for leading processions was kept in Ambala Jail like an ordinary prisoner for a month. She was not allowed to carry her suitcase of clothes. There was no arrangement for bathing and food given was bad, unclean and uncooked. Many a times women were also kept in solitary confinements so that they leave their activities under against the government. The relatives of the

²⁸Personal interview with Smt. Subhadra Joshi cited in Manju Verma, *The Role of Women in the Freedom Movement in Punjab*.

²⁹Personal interview with Smt. Luxmi Arya cited in Manju Verma, *The Role of Women in the Freedom Movement in Punjab*.

³⁰Pattabhi Sitaramayya, *History of the Indian National Congress, vol. II*, New Delhi, S. Chand and Company, 1969, p.761

women prisoners were not allowed to meet them and if any by any chance they fell sick, the proper medical treatment was also not provided to them. The food arrangement was also not proper and that was too affecting the health of the women prisoners.

Conclusion:

Thus, during the Individual Satyagraha and Quit India Movement, women from every nook and corner of the Punjab participated. Even the young girl students did not lag behind. They courted arrests and when they were in jails they happily accepted all the harsh treatment of the Britishers. In this campaign Gandhi asked women to use the previously sanctioned techniques of salt making, boycotts of courts and schools, picketing cloth and liquor shops and non-payment of taxes. People were asked to court arrests. The movement began in the province with strikes, demonstrations and processions. Women participated in the initial strikes and demonstrations in cities. Further these were among the revolutionaries and leaders who joined and even organized the peasant movements, and, when protest was suppressed, joined the secret under ground movements.