

encouraged middle-class and elite women to adopt new models in the public domain and to engage in the range of activities such as social reform spreading the nationalist message and mobilisation for the movement.⁷ From liberal homes and conservative families, urban centres and rural districts, women-single and married, young and old-came forward and joined the struggle against colonial rule. Women's participation called into question the British right to rule, legitimized the Indian nationalist movement and won for activist women, at least for a time, the approval of Indian men.⁸

Politics completely altered the goals and activities of the organized women. Education, social reform and women's rights appealed to some progressive women but the movement to rid the country of its foreign rulers attracted people from all classes, communities, and ideological persuasions.⁹

The participation of the women of Punjab in the nationalist movement can be divided into five phases from 1901-10, 1911-20, 1921-30, 1931-40 and 1941-47. Only important events are taken into account and women's participation is discussed.

In the early years of 1900s that is, from 1901-10, some of the women of Punjab mainly participated in the reformative works. They started their journals with emphasis on highlighting women issues.

7 Suruchi Thapar - Bjorkert, *Women in the Indian National Movement : Unseen Faces and Unheard Voices, 1930-42*, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 2006, p. 40.

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

9 *Ibid*, p. 121.

During this time some people of Punjab were pro-British and not against the policies of British. One woman of Ludhiana whose husband was a police constable (he was already participating in the war), encouraged people of her locality to recruit in the army for helping the British government. Similarly, in August, 1917, one widow of Ferozepur district voluntarily came out on the call of Lieut Governor for recruiting Punjabis in the army. She wanted her son to serve the government.²⁶

However, during this period from 1914-18, women of Punjab and other provinces were influenced by various women leaders like Annie Besant, Sarojini Naidu, Madam Bhikaiji Rustom K.R. Cama. These women spoke in public about the free India. They used to get their articles published in vernacular newspapers and journals. *Sughar Saheli*, Amritsar, a journal of Punjab published the article of Annie Besant and her home Rule League in the October issue of 1916. 'In that article she encouraged women to participate against the government and fight for their own Home Rule.'²⁷

Another important factor which led to the direct and active women's participation in Punjab was the entry of Mahatma Gandhi. 'Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) returned to India in 1915 as the hero of the South African struggle.'²⁸ It was Gandhi who

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 20.

²⁷ *Sughar Saheli*, Amritsar, October, 1916, p. 17.

²⁸ Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, p. 124.

was designed to give the government power to crush popular liberties, to arrest and detain suspected persons without showing any cause and warrant to imprison them without trial.³³

People were against this act and wanted the government to repeal this act as they had shown loyalty to the British government during the first World War. They expected rewards instead of this act. This act was met with the protest all over the nation with a popular cry of 'na wakil, na dalil, na appeal'.³⁴ In Punjab, protest meetings were held at various places in the month of February, 1919³⁵ against the bills. As a protest, even Mahatma Gandhi declared the observance of fast, prayer and suspension of all work for one day - the April 6th, 1919. He suggested that the second Sunday after the publication of the illegal assent to Bill No. II of 1919 to be observed as a day of humiliation and prayer.³⁶ Thus on 23 March 1919, Gandhi issued his hartal manifesto to observe an All India Hartal Day on 6th April 1919.³⁷ He also appealed to the women of India to join this Satyagraha Movement in large numbers and co-operate with the men in the constitutional fight which they were waging against the Rowlatt legislation.³⁸

33 Manju Verma, *The Role of Women in the Freedom Movement in Punjab*, New Delhi, Abhijeet Publications, 2003, p. 32.

34 N.N. Mitra, *The Indian Annual Register*, vol. I, Jan-June 1920, Calcutta, The Annual Register Office, 1920, p. 33.

35 Manju Verma, *The Role of Women in the Freedom Movement in Punjab*, p. 32.

36 *Report of Commissioners appointed by the Punjab Sub-Committee of the Indian National Congress*, 1920, p. 40.

37 *The Indian Annual Register*, vol. I, 1920, p. 36.

38 *The collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 15, New Delhi, The Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1964, p. 189.

body of her husband and brought it to her home.⁵² Another Lady Rattan Devi, who had also ventured into the Bagh despite the curfew order and spent the whole night with her husband's cold head in her lap.⁵³

Instead of having sympathy with the people of Punjab, martial law was enforced and for long the Punjab was almost cut off from the rest of the world.⁵⁴ Martial law was imposed from 15 April to June 1919 in Amritsar, Gujranwala, Lahore, Ferozepur, Gurdaspur, Jhelum, Ludhiana, Rawalpindi, Rohtak, Sialkot, Gujrat, Dera Ghazi Khan, Lyallpur and other districts in Punjab.⁵⁵

The intention behind this Marital law was not only punishing the alleged rioters but also the political agitators. All type of atrocities were done on the inhabitants and women were also directly and indirectly affected. 'In Amritsar the innocent men and women were made to crawl like worms on their bellies.'⁵⁶ Public flogging was done. Even the innocent women were humiliated. Gurdevi of Manianwala gave evidence before the committee of Indian National Congress and said that women of their area were ordered to come out of their houses and beaten with sticks, foulest language was used and were

52 Ganda Singh Collection, File NO. 661, Jallianwala Bagh Massacre especially Bhag Mal Bhatia File. also see *Rozana Nawan Jamana*, Jullundhar, 15 Aug., 1959.

53 Kamlesh Mohan, *Towards Gender History*, p. 163.

54 Pandit Moti Lal Nehru, "Presidential Address on 27th Dec. 1919", *Report of the Indian National Congress, Amritsar, 1919*, p. 21.

55 *Selections from the Report on the Punjab Disturbances, April 1919*, pp. 71 to 83.

56 M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography or the Story or My Experiments with Truth*, Ahmedabad, Navjivan Publishing House, 1940, p. 358.

women were not given proper medical facilities. Inadequate medical treatment and bad food of the jail affected the health of women political prisoners.

Thus, during the Individual Satyagraha and Quit India Movement, women from every nook and corner of the Punjab participated. 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, were among the radical students who organised peasant movements, and, when protest was suppressed, joined the secret underground movements.

Hence, the participation of women of Punjab in the nationalist movement succeeded step by step from 1901-10, 1911-20, 1921-30, 1931-40 and 1941-47. In 1901-10, political upheavals in the province of Bengal affected Punjabi women and few women showed their sympathy with the Bengali people. The decade 1911-20 was the most important decade as the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy and the Martial law of 1919 acted as a catalyst for creating women consciousness for

fighting for the freedom of India. Then these women victims and other sympathetic women directly jumped into the Non-Cooperation movement of 1920. The decade 1921-30, witnessed the direct involvement of women of Punjab in the freedom struggle and these women came into the contact of M.K. Gandhi. The decade 1931-40 was the period of civil disobedience and women of Punjab did not sit back at their homes and got active in disobeying the government by following the non-violent methods of Gandhi from 1930-34. The last seven years from 1941 to 47 were those when the women of Punjab province came forward and fought alongside men and suffered the same consequences as the men suffered. These activist women were so caught up in this struggle that they ignored gender issues or put them aside until independence had been achieved. And in the end in 1947 after the achievement of independence, the women of Punjab were given credit to their deeds as Rajkumari Amrit Kaur of Kapurthala, Punjab was appointed as the first women health minister of the free Independent India.