

# Women's Upliftment Through Sikh Teachings and the Participation of Punjabi Women in India's Freedom Struggle

**Dr. Kirandeep Kaur**

Associate Professor, Sri Guru Granth Sahib World University, Fatehgarh sahib

## Abstract

This paper explores the connection between Sikh teachings on gender equality and the active participation of Punjabi women in India's freedom Movement. Sikhism, with its strong emphasis on equality, dignity and social responsibility, created a cultural foundation that encouraged women to participate in public life. Building on this foundation, Punjabi women played an important role in nationalist Movements such as the Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement and Quit India Movement. They engaged in protests, awareness campaigns, social reform, and post-independence rehabilitation work. This study highlights selected women from Punjab whose contributions reflect courage, leadership and dedication to national service.

**Keywords:** Sikhism, Gender Equality, Nationalist Movements, Punjabi Women, Indian Freedom Struggle, Social Reform, Leadership, Rehabilitation, Punjab.

## Introduction

Women have always been an important part of Indian society, though their contributions have often been underrepresented in historical accounts. During the freedom struggle, women stepped out of traditional boundaries and actively participated in political and social Movements. Swaraj, Swadeshi and National Education became the slogans of the Nationalists. Women who had begun to participate in the deliberations of the Indian National Congress now further took up the responsibility to share the national efforts through the press and the platform. There was no mass awakening amongst the women at this time but there was some sort of movement spreading slowly in them.<sup>1</sup>

The women activists of Punjab played a leading role in the freedom of the state.<sup>2</sup>

Punjab, known for its culture of bravery and resistance, became an important centre of women's participation in the Nationalist Movement. The involvement of Punjabi women was not accidental but deeply connected to the region's social and religious environment, particularly the egalitarian teachings of Sikhism, which encouraged equality and service. Fauja Singh Says, "The freedom struggle in the Punjab presents the spectrum of promoting a popular participation."<sup>3</sup>

Punjab has produced many remarkable women freedom fighters whose courage and sacrifice played a vital role in India's struggle for independence. While it is impossible to mention all of them in detail, this study highlights a few exemplary figures who made significant contributions.

### **Sikhism and the Foundation of Women's Empowerment**

Sikhism played a significant role in shaping a relatively progressive attitude toward women in Punjab. From its early development, Sikh teachings emphasized that all human beings are equal in the eyes of the divine.

Guru Nanak Dev Ji, the founder of Sikhism, strongly challenged prevailing patriarchal norms. He rejected practices such as sati, purdah and female inferiority, declaring that women are equal partners in both spiritual and social life. His famous assertion—"Why call her bad, from whom kings are born?"<sup>4</sup> established the philosophical basis for gender equality in Sikh thought. This ideological foundation was further strengthened by subsequent Sikh Gurus.

Guru Angad Dev Ji entrusted the responsibility of managing and organizing the community langar to Mata Khivi Ji, whose dedicated service, efficient administration, and spirit of equality played a vital role in strengthening the Sikh institution of langar.

Guru Amar Das Ji institutionalized women's participation in religious and social life by appointing women as preachers and encouraging them to participate in community gatherings. He also condemned social evils such as sati pratha<sup>5</sup>, parda pratha<sup>6</sup> and child marriage, promoting widow remarriage and women's dignity.

Mata Sahib Kaur is revered as 'Khalsa di Mata' (Mother of the Khalsa) because of her spiritual contribution to the creation of the Khalsa in 1699, when she added patashas to the Amrit at the direction of Guru Gobind Singh Ji, symbolizing the integration of compassion with courage in the Khalsa tradition.

This egalitarian religious framework significantly influenced Punjabi society, particularly in shaping women's self-confidence and public participation. As a result, Sikh women historically enjoyed comparatively greater social mobility and visibility in public life, which later translated into active participation in Nationalist Movements.

Together, these teachings created an environment in Punjab where women were more socially active, confident and willing to participate in public affairs compared to many other regions.

### **Influence of Sikh Values on Nationalist Participation**

The Sikh principles of equality, service and resistance against injustice influenced the social mind-set of Punjab. These values aligned with the broader nationalist philosophy that developed during India's freedom struggle.

As a result, women in Punjab became active participants in:

- Political protests and demonstrations
- Boycott of foreign goods (Swadeshi Movement)
- Spinning and khadi production
- Social reform and women's education
- Anti-colonial speeches and mobilization campaigns

Their participation was especially strong during major National Movements between 1920 and 1947.

### **Contribution of Women in Punjab's Freedom Movement**

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.<sup>7</sup>

In Revolutionary Movement Durga Bhabi played a pioneer role. She was one of the few women revolutionaries who actively participated in armed revolution against the ruling British Raj. She is best known for having accompanied Bhagat Singh on the train journey.<sup>8</sup>

Sarla Devi Chaudhurani played an important role in promoting education and political awareness among women. She encouraged Swadeshi practices and supported spinning activities, helping women connect with nationalist ideas. Sarla Devi remained an ardent Congress worker till her death in 1945 and participated in the various campaigns launched to achieve freedom.<sup>9</sup>

Parvati Devi, born in 1858 in Layalpur, was a dedicated freedom fighter who joined the national movement in 1919. Despite facing child marriage and early widowhood, she actively promoted Swadeshi, supported revolutionary activities through the Naujawan Bharat Sabha, and led women Movements. She founded the Kumari Sabha and Banar Sena in Agra and was imprisoned several times for her patriotic work. Her Speeches had so much of impact on the masses that at a single place 500 foreign clothes were collected for bonfire.<sup>10</sup> After Independence, she settled in Agra, where she spent the rest of her life.

Bhag Devi actively participated in civil disobedience activities and promoted khadi. Later, she became involved in legislative work and contributed to refugee rehabilitation after independence. Chand Bhai worked at the grassroots level, spreading political awareness through public meetings and campaigns. She sold khaddar from door-to-door. She was also imprisoned for her nationalist activities. Amar Kaur joined the Freedom Movement in the early 1920s and worked to mobilize rural women during major nationalist protests. She faced repeated arrests but remained committed to the cause.

Amtu Salam, Luxmi Arya were also influenced by Gandhian ideology and worked in Sabarmati Ashrams promoting khadi and social unity. After Partition, they helped in rehabilitation work for displaced women. Gauran Devi served as an active national volunteer in the Freedom Movement from 1921 to 1947. She did commendable work in the Swaraj Movement. She was honoured with Janak Devi Bajaj award for her service for the downtrodden, welfare of women and children.<sup>11</sup>

Lado Rani Zutshi was a strong leader during the Civil Disobedience Movement. She also joined salt satyagraha Movement. She led processions several times, organized meetings and made bonfires of foreign clothes publicly. She was the founder of Mahila Sammelan in Allahabad and Kumari Sabha in Lahore. She also organised a ladies Recreation Club in Lahore.<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup> She was a major national leader who participated in all major Movements. After independence, she became India's first Health Minister and worked for public health reforms. Bibi Amar Kaur was jailed for her fiery speeches against the British Raj. She showed exceptional courage by hoisting the national flag in Lahore Jail during British rule and endured imprisonment with her child. Pushpa Gujral organized women in Jhelum and actively participated in protests, boycotts and nationalist campaigns. She also faced imprisonment during her political activities.

### **Post-Independence Role of Women**

After independence, many Punjabi women freedom fighters continued their service by:

- Supporting refugee rehabilitation
- Assisting displaced and abducted women
- Promoting education and health awareness

- Engaging in social welfare programs

Their contribution helped rebuild society after Partition and extended the spirit of nationalism into nation-building.

### Conclusion

The women of Punjab played a vital role in India's freedom struggle. Their participation was influenced by Sikh teachings that emphasized equality and service. This cultural foundation encouraged them to step into public life and actively support Nationalist Movements.

Despite facing imprisonment, social pressure and political repression, these women remained committed to the cause of independence. Their contribution was not limited to political protest but also extended to education, social reform and humanitarian work. Their legacy reflects courage, determination and leadership, making them an essential part of India's freedom history.

### References:

1. Manmohan Kaur, *Women in India's Freedom Struggle (1857-1947)*, Sterling Publishers, Delhi, 1985, p. 96.
2. Sweta Singh, "Participation of Women in the Freedom Struggle Movements in Punjab", *Reform, Revival and Revolutionary Movements in the Colonial Punjab*, C-Writewell Publications, Jalandhar, 2015, p. 134.
3. Fauja Singh, *Eminent Freedom Fighters of Punjab*, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1972, p.1.
4. *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, 473.
5. *Saṭeāā ēhi na āakheeāni jo mariāā lagi jalann<sup>hi</sup> || Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, 787.
6. In the more recent period, Mahatma Gandhi criticised the institution of Purdah. He said, "Chastity is not a hot house growth. It cannot be superimposed. It cannot be protected by the surrounding walls of the Purdah."  
M. K. Gandhi, *Women and Social Injustice*, Ahmedabad, 1945, p. 101.
7. Charanji Lal Kangniwal, *Ghadarian De Chauni: Jhar Sahib*, Desh Bhagat Yadgar Committee, Jalandhar, 2012, pp.21-24.
8. "The Tribune...Sunday Reading". Tribuneindia.com. Retrieved 9 November 2012.
9. Manmohan Kaur, *Women in India's Freedom Struggle (1857-1947)*, Sterling Publishers, Delhi, 1985, p. 107.
10. Manju Verma, *The Role of Women in Freedom Movement in Punjab*, p. 218.
11. *Ibid*, p. 227.
12. *Ibid*, p. 228.
13. Malwinderjit Singh Waraich, *Bhagwati Charan Vohra: Jeevani Ate Shaheedi*, Lokgeet Parkashan, Chandigarh, 2007, p. 21.