

## **The Role of Women of Haryana in the Freedom Struggle of India**

**Dr.Surinder Kaur**

---

Women participation in India's freedom struggle began over a century ago before it became independent in 1947. When the history of India's fight for Independence comes to be written, the sacrifice made by the women of India will occupy the foremost place. Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru had remarked, "when most of the men-folk were in prison then a remarkable thing happened. Our women came forward and took charge of the struggle against British government. Their participation in protest meetings, and in the nationwide programmes of boycotting titles, honours, elections, legislatures, schools, colleges, courts and tribunals and foreign goods showed the great sense of patriotism. The purpose of this study is to assess the role of women especially of Haryana in the freedom struggle during the year 1901-1947.

In the issues of 'Young India', of July 26, 1918 and January 14, 1930 respectively Mahatma Gandhi discussed the importance of women in social revolution, reconstruction and in the nationalist struggle. He wanted the women to join the struggle for freedom at the appropriate time. In response to his call, women overwhelmingly participated in non-violent Satyagraha and Civil Disobedience Movement. They also lent their assistance to secretive societies which believed that only armed revolution could bring freedom to their country.

The participation of the women of Haryana in the nationalist movement can be divided into 5 phases from 1901-10, 1911-20, 1921-30, 1931-40, 1941-47. Only important events are taken into account which clearly shows women's participation.

During the years of 1900 to 1910 women were mainly involved in the reformatory works. Various educational institutions, widow ashrams and reformatory organisations were opened in Karnal, Bhivani, Rohtak, Hissar, Panipat, and Kurukshetra etc.. Even in the early two decades of 1900s local reformers and leaders were more inclined to reforms and were working against social customs like female infanticide, widowhood, purdah system, sati system, child marriage and others. Thus, female education was considered the best medium for women emancipation. Various organisations and associations were formed which led the women of Haryana to come out of their homes to contribute in the public sphere. 'Involvement of Women in the public life' made them aware about the other provinces of India; and events happening in these provinces. And most important, print media particularly vernacular press played a significant role. The appeals of local and national leaders through press and journals motivated women to participate in the Nationalist struggle. The Nationalist struggle in India against the British colonial rule brought about the political mobilisation of both men and women.

On Oct 16<sup>th</sup> 1905 Lord Curzon partitioned Bengal and leaders of Bengal announced that day as a day of national mourning. A general hartal was announced in Bengal and people fasted and went bare foot to take a bath in Ganga. There swaraj, swadeshi and National education became the slogans of the Nationalists. Meetings were arranged by women in streets. Bengali Swadeshi movement infused a feeling of patriotism among women of Haryana. Smt. Purni Devi of Hissar advocated the cause of Swadeshi. She was one of the prominent worker of Arya Samaj. While speaking to women at

\*Assistant Professor (History), GGSCW-26, Chandigarh

Hissar, she not only criticised caste restrictions, but also exhorted women to bring up her sons not with the view to joining Government services, but to an independent participation in trade, especially the manufacture and sale of Swadeshi. Agyavati of Delhi started a Vidhwa Ashram where widows and other women received political training and were taught to preach without the distinction of caste and creed.

During the period from 1914-18, women of Haryana and other provinces were influenced by various women leaders like Annie Besant, Sarojini Naidu, Madam Bhikaji 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. In the October issue of 1916, Annie Besant encouraged women to participate against the government and fight for their own 'Home Rule.'

When Rowlatt legislation was passed on 23 March 1919, women of India joined Satyagraha movement to co-operate with the men in the constitutional fight. A complete hartal was observed on 30th March, 1919 at Panipat, kurukshetra, Amritsar, Fazilka, Ferozepur, Hoshiarpur, Jhang, Karnal, Multan and Muzaffargarh. On that day, the leaders and the people seemed to act in complete union. Women and children participated in the programme and observed fast and recited prayers in their homes. The wives, daughters and sisters of the prominent Congress leaders also came forward. Among them were Smt. Satyawati (wife of Lala Achint Ram of Lahore), Smt. Bhag Devi (wife of Lala Dhuni Chand of Ambala), Smt. Pushpa Gujral (wife of A.N. Gujral of Jhelum) and Smt. Guran Devi (wife of L.C. Dutt of Sialkot). Smt. Shakuntla Devi of Ambala, Chhano Devi of Bhivani, Smt. Khajani Devi of Bhivani, Daya wanti and Krishna wanti of Ambala etc. protested openly in the meeting of women held in the Arya Samaj Temple on 31st March 1919 at Delhi and also extensively helped in circulating revolutionary leaflets and literature and in maintaining liaison between different revolutionary and national leaders.

At the call of Mahatma Gandhi, a large number of women took part in the Gandhi's non-violent programme of spinning and weaving khadi, boycott of foreign clothes, removal of untouchability and promotion of communal harmony which gave women an immense opportunity to show their calibre.

From 1921 to 1922, there had been a number of demonstrations in almost every district. In January 1922, Smt. Parmeshwari Devi, wife of Chaudhary Ake Singh of Bhiwani, highlighted the importance of Swadeshi before the women in a public meeting and organized a procession. The wife of Duni Chand of Lahore, Kumari Lajjawati, Shrimati Parbati Devi (daughter of Lala Lajpat Rai) and Shrimati Puran Devi (wife of Thakur Dass) all appeared on the public platform. The first activities of these women were more or less confined to processions, national songs, the Swadeshi campaign and meetings. Efforts were made to enlist more and more lady volunteers for the propaganda work. Separate Ladies Congress Committees were organized at some places with the efforts of women leadership. The women leaders extensively toured the province along with the other members and delivered speeches. This led to the formation of various Congress Committees and women started becoming their members. Thus, it can be seen that women were becoming active day by day in a single month in a district where thousand women enlisted in the Congress Committee. These committee members delivered their speeches at every place. Smt. Kasturi Bai and Smt. Puran Devi of Rohtak or Smt. Prem Kaur of Ambala accused the government of tempering with religion. Shrimati Roop Kaur of Amritsar made offensive speeches in the Rohtak district. At Layalpur, Mussammam Maqbul Begum (wife of Siraj-ud-din) spoke against the government and their policies. At Gurdaspur, Shrimati Bhagmati Devi distinguished herself by the violent language and encouraged her fellow sisters to fight against the foreign government. The year 1921 brought no respite from the political agitation.

The Congress Movement with its programme of Non-Cooperation and establishment of Congress Committees was pushed on vigorously, especially by means of public meeting and processions.

Women were also engaged in picketing of foreign cloth shops and liquor shops to stop the sale of foreign cloth by the dealers and to stop the use of liquor. The picketing was entrusted to the women by Gandhi and no buyer dared to come near the shops where women picketers were seen and even the shopkeepers used to behave well with the women. This participation of women in large numbers proved beyond doubt, the freedom movement was in the process of becoming a mass movement. 'Sarla Devi Chaudhrani, Smt. Parvati Devi of Kamalia, Smt. Puran Devi, Smt. Gauran Devi, Mrs. Duni Chand, Smt. Luxmi Arya, Smt. Pushpa Gujral, Smt. Chand Bai, Smt. Lal Devi, Smt. Kasturi Bai, Smt. Puran Devi Kumari Lajjavati and Lado Rani Zutshi were the names of other few women who participated in this movement. Among them, Luxmi Aryan of Rohtak became an important participant in Gandhian movements from 1920-1940. From 1930 onwards when she joined Sabarmati Ashram, Luxmi participated in constructive programme and political activities, such as picketing liquor shops, no-tax campaigns, salt satyagrah and individual satyagrah against India's enforced participation in the second world war. She suffered imprisonment for varied terms in jail and was fined a number of times as a picketer. Besides her active participation in the campaigns for uplift of harijans, Luxmi donated her agricultural land for this cause. The Swadeshi movement could not have succeeded without the help of the women. This participation was a sort of training programme for the future Satyagraha programmes of 1930-34 and 1940-42.

Sucheta Majumdar Kriplani (born in Ambala who did her studies from Punjab and Delhi and was married to Acharaya Kriplani of Allahabad) was chosen to organize women's wing of the Indian National Congress in 1940. The department used to work for raising the political consciousness of women and identify Congress with social change that benefited women.

Some of the women even started working secretly in the underground organisations to evade police arrests. 'Smt. Subhadra Joshi was one of them who undertook the work of editing an cyclostyled paper Hamara Sangram. This paper was published in Hindi from Delhi. She become target of the C.I.D. officials and was later arrested. Luxmi Aryan 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. Nirmala Devi of Chhindwara had stayed with her parents in Mahatma Gandhi's ashram in Sewagram, Wardha, and had also participated in freedom movement including Quit India movement of 1942. That had resulted in her getting arrested and put in jail along with other freedom fighters. The political active women leaders were arrested and the treatment meted out to them was vindictive and far from satisfactory.

Hence, the participation of women of Haryana in the nationalist movement succeeded step by step from 1901-10, 1911-20, 1921-30, 1931-40 and 1941-47. These activist women were so caught up in this struggle, that they ignored gender issues or put them aside until independence had been achieved. The most unknown women freedom fighters of Haryana were less educated but had such a marvellous understanding that when they got opportunity to prove their might and calibre, they did not lag behind their joining the movement in itself is very credential but their valuable assistance, strong dedication and deep involvement in the national movement deserves to be mentioned in the Role of Honour of those who fought for India's independence.

**References:**

1. Anup Taneja, Gandhi , Women, and the National Movement:1920-1947.
2. B.R. Nanda (ed.) Indian Women : From Purdah to Modernity, New Delhi, 1976.
3. Geraldine Forbes, The New Cambridge History of India:Women in India, New Delhi , Cambridge University Press,1999.
4. Manju Verma, The Role of Women in the Freedom Movement of Punjab(1919-1947), Delhi, 2003.
5. Manmohan Kaur , Women in India's freedom Struggle , Sterling Publishers Private Limited, New Delhi.
6. Pattabhi Sitaramya, History of Indian National Congress, Vol.11, New Delhi,1969.
7. Report on the Indian National Congress held at Ahmedabad,1921.
8. Suruchi Thapar, Women in Indian National Movement, New Delhi , Sage Publications, 2006.