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## ROLE OF SOCIETY TOWARDS WOMEN DURING THE PARTITION OF PUNJAB

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**ABSTRACT-** *Men often justified their actions towards women as part of a broader communal or political goal. In the chaos of Partition, men weaponized women's bodies to make political statements, whether it was to "purify" their community or to humiliate the enemy. After Partition, both India and Pakistan initiated efforts to recover abducted women. Men in law enforcement, government, and social services were instrumental in these operations. However, this process was fraught with challenges. Many women, having been forcibly married and integrated into new families, were reluctant to return. Men's role in this period was both one of rescuers and, at times, enforcers of societal stigma, as returning women were often ostracized and stigmatized by their own families and communities.*

**Key Words -** *Partition, communal, violence, community, Independence, Movements*

The Partition of Punjab in 1947, as part of the larger Partition of India, was marked by extreme violence, trauma, and mass displacement. Punjab was one of the most severely affected regions due to its religious diversity<sup>1</sup> (comprising Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims) and its central location on the newly drawn border between India and Pakistan. During this period, men's roles towards women were shaped by deep-seated patriarchy, communal tensions, and the unprecedented scale of violence. Here's an in-depth exploration of how men acted towards women during the Partition of Punjab<sup>2</sup>:

One of the most tragic aspects of the violence during the Partition of Punjab was the phenomenon of honor killings. Men, particularly in Sikh and Hindu communities, often killed their own women (wives, daughters, sisters) to protect the family's "honor" from perceived defilement by the opposing community. The fear of women being abducted, raped, or converted by Muslim men (and vice versa in the case of Muslim families) drove men to commit these acts. For these men, it was seen as a preferable alternative to the "dishonor" that sexual violence or conversion would bring to their family.

In several cases, women were encouraged or forced to commit mass suicide to preserve family honor. This occurred particularly in Sikh communities where women, sometimes en masse, jumped into wells, drowned, or immolated themselves to avoid being captured by Muslim men. Men played a central role in orchestrating these acts, which were considered "heroic" or sacrificial under the weight of societal pressure<sup>3</sup>.

Male from all sides—Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim—were involved in widespread acts of sexual violence. Women were abducted, raped, and forcibly converted as part of the communal conflict. The violence was often systematic and used as a tool of humiliation, targeting women to exact revenge on the opposing religious community. Sexual violence against women was deeply intertwined with the desire

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<sup>1</sup>Savinder Pal, *Role of Punjabi Women in India freedom struggle*, Unistar Books Pvt. Ltd, Chandigarh, 2014, p. 12

<sup>2</sup>SenguptaPadmini, *The Story of Women of India*, New Delhi, Indian Book Company, 1974. p.34

<sup>3</sup>*The Tribune*, 20th September, 1924



to claim dominance over the other group, and women's bodies became the battlefield on which men enacted these communal tensions.

Abducted women were often forcibly married to men from the opposing religious community. Hindu and Sikh women were taken by Muslim men<sup>4</sup>, while Muslim women were similarly captured by Hindu and Sikh men. These acts were meant to assert religious and communal superiority, with men using women as symbols of conquest in this violent upheaval.

Despite the rampant violence, there were instances where men from all religious communities acted to protect women. Some men, either individually or through community-based efforts, sheltered women from abduction and violence. They helped women cross the newly drawn borders safely, often hiding them from attackers from their own community. In many cases, men facilitated the escape of women to refugee camps or helped them reach safer regions on the other side of the border. Some men, going against the grain of the communal violence around them, protected women of different religions, emphasizing humanity over religious identity. These acts of bravery, though less documented, were crucial in saving lives during this period.

Many male, particularly in militias and communal gangs, participated in organized violence targeting women. Sikh jathas (armed groups) and Muslim mobs attacked women of the opposite community as part of broader revenge campaigns. These groups saw the violation of women as a way to assert communal vengeance, striking at what was considered the "honor" of the opposing group.<sup>5</sup> Women were not only raped but also mutilated, paraded naked, and tortured—acts fueled by a toxic mix of religious hatred and masculine aggression.

Male within families and communities often played a significant role in deciding whether abducted or raped women were accepted back into their homes. The patriarchal values of the time meant that women who had been violated were often viewed as "tainted" or "impure." Men frequently rejected these women, further deepening their trauma.

Male often dictated the fate of women during and after the Partition. Whether it was pushing them towards self-sacrifice in the name of honor or forcing them into marriages with captors, women's autonomy was severely restricted. Even in post-Partition recovery efforts, the decisions made by men often overshadowed the desires and agency of the women themselves, who had to navigate societal expectations while dealing with the traumas they had endured.

The role of male towards women during the Partition of Punjab was largely dictated by a mixture of patriarchy, communal hatred, and a breakdown of societal norms. While many men perpetrated horrific acts of violence, there were also those who tried to protect and rescue women from the brutality of the time. The partition of Punjab saw men using women as symbols of honor and shame, often at the cost of women's agency, safety, and lives. In the aftermath, the legacy of these actions continued to shape gender relations and societal values in both India and Pakistan.

The British conquest of India transformed the social setting in India. The destruction of old society and emergence of the new after the British conquest of India was paralleled by the growth of a new outlook

<sup>4</sup>Forbes Geraldine, *Modern Women in India*, (Cambridge University Press, 2000), op.cit, p.70

<sup>5</sup>Bharat Ray, *Early Feminists of Colonial India: Sarla Devi Chaudhurani and RokeeySakhawatHussain*, p.85



among the Indian people. During the nineteenth century the pattern of women's lives began to change. Education was one of the items of reform agenda that contributed to the emancipation of women. In the late 19th and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the people in Punjab were more oriented towards the social upliftment of the women.

The pioneering work of women's education was done by socio-religious reform movements as the Brahma Samaj, the Arya Samaj, the Ramakrishna mission, Nirankari movement, Namdhari movement, *Sanatan Dharam* movement, the Singh Sabha and Christian Missionaries. Even in the early two decades of 1990s local reformers and leaders were more inclined to reforms and were working against social customs like female infanticide, widowhood, 'Purdah' systems, 'Sati' system, child marriage and others. Thus, female education was considered the best medium for women emancipation. In fact these reform movements created a platform for women and slowly various organizations and associations were formed which led the women of the Punjab to come out of their homes to participate in the public sphere<sup>6</sup>.

One of the most important factors was print media particularly vernacular press which played a significant role for bringing awareness amongst the women. The appeals of local and national leaders in those issues motivated women to participate in the National struggle. Thus nationalist struggle in India against the British colonial rule brought about the political mobilization of both men and women. It 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 mobilization for the movement.

By the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century there were a number of women who were educated, articulate mobile and increasingly involved in public activities. In the wake of public activities the women associations were organized all over India in the late 19 and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, gave to women a platform to work actively and unitedly for the sake of nation. From 1901-10 some of the women of the Punjab mainly participated in the reformative works. They started their journals with emphasis on highlighting women issues. In this context Bibi Harnam Kaur along with her husband Bhai Takht Singh opened 'Sikh Kanya Mahavidyalaya' in Ferozepur in 1894.

This institution started its educational journal 'Punjabi Bhain'. Sarla Devi Chaudhrani, along with Ram Bhaj Dutt Chaudhary founded Hindu Sahayak Sabha' in Lahore in 1906. Later on branches of this sabha were founded in Multan, Jhang, Sialkot, Lyallpur and Gujranwala. The sabhas were opened to make men and women physically fit as they were taught gymnastics, swordplay, Ghatka' fights and other activities.

Sarla Devi Chaudhrani's the Bharat Stree Mahamandal had its first meeting in Allahabad in 1910. It was planned to open the branches of the Mandal in all parts of India to promote female education to condemn Purdha system. So it developed branches in Lahore, Allahabad, Delhi, Karachi, Amritsar, etc."

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<sup>6</sup>Manjit Singh, *Women and Empowerment - Experiences from some Asian Countries*, Unistar Books Private Ltd., Chandigarh, 2005, pp. 82-83



Another factor which led to the direct and active women's participation in the Punjab was the entry of Mahatma Gandhi in Indian politics. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) returned to India in 1915 as the hero of the South African struggle.<sup>6</sup> It was Gandhi who gave a new direction, strength and inspiration to the freedom movement and drew into it women in large numbers. Unlike the social reformers, Gandhi had realized some of the negative consequences of colonial rule on women's economic status.<sup>7</sup> This realization strengthened his decision to launch the Khadi movement. The Khadi movement depends on the women. The movement would collapse today if the women were to refuse to extend their cooperation to calling Khadi essentially a women's movement served many purposes. It brought the women an income and unleashed women's aspirations to break through 'Purdah' and other barriers of inequality. It also enabled Gandhi to challenge the dominant upper caste and middle class values to equate the family status with women's non-involvement in productive work. Therefore a brief account of the above mentioned factors played the important role in improving the social, economic condition of women in the Punjab. So it became easy for them to jump into the freedom struggle. The history of the Indian Independence Movement is a saga of heroic deeds of men and women. The uprising of 1857 formed the background of the Freedom struggle. Rani of Jhansi Laxmi Bai blazed a trail of courageous resistance to the British. Thus by the early twentieth century the awakening of women was almost complete. When Mahatma Gandhi called women to leave their hearth and homes and join the Satyagraha then they could not hold them back. They participated in every event of the freedom struggle whether it was revolutionary movements, call of Indian National Congress, Swadeshi Movement, Non-Cooperation Movement or finally the Quit India Movement.

The Swadeshi Movement was among other things the outcome of the partition of Bengal, which was announced on 20th July 1905 and went into effect on 16th October 1905. The articulation against the partition of Bengal became the matrix of Swadeshi ideology. So it was the partition of Bengal which galvanised and transformed women's participation in the national movement. Under the patronage of Arya Samaj, the women of Punjab took keen interest in Swadeshi Movement. They formed their own small groups and organized separate meetings of women. The objects of their meetings were purely nationalist not feminists. In the beginning, their activities were confined to collection of funds for the Samaj' and popularization of indigenous goods.

Many prominent women of the Punjab who assumed the new roles of leadership, were Sarla Devi Chaudhurani, Har Devi, Vero Amolakram, Ramji Wai Hansraj, Poori, Smt. Jamna Bai and Sit. Sushila. 'Sarladevi Chaudhurani originated the idea of donating one-tenth of ornaments by Hindu women to the "Revenge Fund". For the collection of Revenge Fund, Female committees were formed. It was a striking feature that even the Muslim women also joined the committees of Hindu women. Informal groups of women which owed its origin during the Swadeshi Movement gained momentum. Close acquaintance and mutual exchange of views among the women in these groups nurtured the idea of a formal group. 'Har Devi, wife of Roshan Lal, a Barrister 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. In 1908 she arranged meeting and collected funds for the purpose of assisting revolutionaries under trial. The women workers of the Arya Samaj were also responsible for arousing national spirit among the people. Smt. Purni who was working for the Arya Samaj at Hissar, toured the various districts of the Punjab and advocated the cause of Swadeshi.

<sup>7</sup>Mohinder Kaur, *Istri conference kiki Karegi?*, Bhujangan Pattar, Kairon, 1917, p.31



Women began to define their interests, propose resolutions and take action only after they formed their own association. In this context Sarladevi Chaudhurani (1872-1954), a Bengali woman is an excellent example of the "new woman" She completed her graduation with honors in English in 1890. In 1905 she married Rambhaji Dutt from Lahore, a Punjabi nationalist and member of Arya Samaj. Sarladevi, indeed, was an unusual woman of her time. Her organization, the Bharat Stree

Mahamandal, played a crucial role in freedom struggle. 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. Though their total number were small, the involvement was extremely important. The Jallianwala Bagh Massacre of 13<sup>th</sup> April, 1919 had a great catalytic effect upon the political attitude of the people, especially on the women.

On the whole the Rowlatt Act and Amritsar massacre both created the ground for the active participation of women in freedom struggle of Punjab. One of the major cause of the popular outburst in the Punjab was the passing of the Rowlatt Acts at the beginning of 1919 prohibiting public protest and suspending civil liberties. This was when Gandhi began to develop a programme for women. On April 6, the day marked for a general strike throughout India, he addressed a meeting of "ladies of all classes and communities" and asked them to join the Satyagraha (peaceful resistance), Punjab also observed complete hartal on 6th April 1919<sup>8</sup>.

Even women and children participated in the programme and observed fast and recited prayers in their homes. During the hartal on 6th April, 1919, the wives, daughters and sisters of the prominent congress leaders also came forward. Smt. Satyawati (wife of Lala Achint Ram of Lahore), Smt. Bhag Devi (wife of Lala Duni Chand of Ambala), Smt. Pushpa Gujral (wife of A.N. Guiral of Jhelum) and Smt. Guran Devi (wife of L.C. Dutt of Sialkot). After the massacre of Jallianwala Bagh, a curfew was imposed in the city. So the women of Amritsar had to suffer from mental torture during the curfew. Bibi Attar Kaur, a six month pregnant lady experienced this traumatic experience. On the death of her husband Bhag Mal Bhatia, who had also gone to Jallianwala Bagh & after the news of firing was heard by his wife Attar Kaur, she went to the Bagh to find him. She saw dead body of her husband was lying between hundred of brutally killed people and she brought it to her home. Another lady Rattan Devi, who had also ventured in Bagh despite the curfew order and spent the whole night with her husband's cold head in her lap.

This tragic scenario of Amritsar massacre was one of the major factors which forced Mahatma Gandhi to start a peaceful non-violent movement of non-cooperation and declared Swaraj as the ultimate goal. Besides the Khilafat issue of Muslims they also started Khilafat Movement against the imperialist government. So both non-cooperation movement and Khilafat Movement were going simultaneously under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. He appealed to the people to surrender their titles, to boycott government educational institutions, boycott legislative councils, boycott of British goods and propagation of Swadeshi and stress was laid upon the use of Charkha and Khadi.

During the Noncooperation movement from 1921-1922 Laijawati (wife of Duni Chand of Lahore), Smt. Parbati Devi (daughter of Lala Lajpat Rai) and Smt. Purnan Devi (wife of Thakur Dass) all appeared on the public platform. The activities of these women were more or less confined to

<sup>8</sup>Gurnam Singh, *A Unilingual Punjabi State and the Sikh Unrest*, Super Press, New Delhi, 1960, p-21.





processions reciting of national songs, the Swadeshi campaigns and meetings. When the movement was on its peak, Gandhi had to retrace his steps at Bardoli on 11-12 February 1922, due to the outbreak of violence that took place at Chauri Chaura (U.P.) on 5<sup>th</sup> February, 1922.<sup>30</sup> During the post non-cooperation movement activities in the Punjab, the first ladies meeting held on December 6-7, 1922 which was presided over by Kasturba Gandhi, Radha Devi wife of Lala Lajpat Rai, was the Chairperson of the Reception Committee. She exhorted her country women to support the Swaraj Movement with zeal and courage, characteristics of Punjabi ladies<sup>9</sup>.

In the Punjab Sarla Devi Chaudharani was the first woman who was deeply influenced by Gandhian philosophy. She accompanied Gandhi during his whirlwind tours before launching the Noncooperation Movement in 1920. Sarla Devi Chaudharani became an accepted mobiliser of youth in the nationalist cause, and was noted by official intelligence reports as 'far more dangerous' to the Raj than her husband, a well-known revolutionary. Another woman who had great influence of Gandhi was Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur (1889-1964), a member of the Ahluwalia royal family of Kapurthala state, served as Gandhi's secretary for sixteen years. She admired Gandhi for his fight for justice. Other women who came under the influence of Gandhi were - Smt. Bhag Devi, wife of Lala Duni Chand, advocate of Ambala, Smt. Chand Bai, wife of Lala Sham Lal, Advocate of Hissar, Amar Kaur, wife of Mohan Lal Ahluwalia, an advocate of Gurdaspur and Smt. Pushpa Gujral, wife of Avtar Narain Gujral a leading advocate of Jhelum. They all actively participated in activities like popularization of Khaddar Spinning and wearing, picketing of foreign cloth and liquor shops.

When congress met in Lahore in 1929, Sardar Bhagat Singh organized the Lahore Students Union. Lado Rani Zutshi, the wife of Moti Lal Nehru's nephew, and three of her daughters, Manmohini, Shyama and Janak led the movement in Lahore. Manmohini was raised in politics. In 1929, as a student of Government College, she became the first woman President of the Lahore Students Union and served as a volunteer at Lahore Congress. Mahatma Gandhi started his historic March to Dandi on the sea coast on 12<sup>th</sup> March, 1930 to protest against Salt tax and formally inaugurated the campaign for breaking the Salt Law.

To respond to the Gandhi's Movement, the women of the Punjab inaugurated the Civil Disobedience Movement by taking out a procession of five thousand ladies in Lahore in 1930. Processions, meetings, picketing and '*Prabhat Pheris*' in defiance of section 144 became their daily routine. Day after day they held demonstration before the gates of the council chambers. The police and their *lathi* charge had ceased to scare them. The life and soul of the movement was Mrs. Lado Rani Zutshi, Parvati Devi daughter of Lala Lajpat Rai, Smt. Kartar Kaur, Atma Devi and many others.'

Parvati Devi was a steadfast congress worker and took part in all the programmes of Satyagraha Committee in 1930. She was arrested under Section 124A Criminal Procedure Code. Parvati Devi, the granddaughter of Swami Shradh Anand,<sup>10</sup> became one of the leaders in Delhi. Satyawati, urged the women to join in madimkpetsonal sacrifices for the nation." She women that forelen domination is unbearable. Judging flees impassioned speeches inflammatory, the authorities moved

<sup>9</sup>Myron Weiner, *The Politics of Scarcity*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1962, p-15.

<sup>10</sup>Jaswant Singh, *A Plea for a Punjabi State*, Super Press, New Delhi, 1960, p-158



quickly. They arrested and imprisoned Satyavati Devi, released her, re-arrested her and finally sentenced her two years imprisonment in 1932.

Women had deep faith on Gandhi, even a revolutionary woman, Smt. Durga Devi, inspired by being absconder in second Lahore Conspiracy Case, went to meet Gandhi and requested him to make efforts to save Bhagat Singh and his associates from execution which the British Government pronounced on 7<sup>th</sup> October 1930, condemning Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru's death, but no effort could save Bhagat Singh and his associates. They were executed on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1931, at Borstal Jail, Lahore. In the end of March 1931, Gandhi came to Karachi to attend the annual session of Indian National Congress. When his train passed through Punjab at almost every station people received him with black badges but women shouted at him, "Bring our Bhagat Singh back". They felt ditched as if Gandhi did not make any effort to save their Bhagat Singh.

In March 1931, after considerable negotiations the Gandhi- Irwin Pact was concluded. Under the terms of the pact the government agreed to stop repression and released political prisoners excluding those convicted of violent offences. Gandhi, on his side, consented to withdraw the Civil Disobedience Movement and stood for the participation of the congress in Round Table Conference. The next few years witnessed Gandhi's important campaign - The Individual Satyagraha. In 1939 Second World War began and it left a decisive impact on the political scenario of India. The Quit India Movement of 1942<sup>11</sup> presents perhaps the most important phase of India's struggle for freedom. In August, 1942, the All India Congress Committee passed its famous "Quit India Resolution". Gandhiji started the Quit India Movement asking the British to 'Quit India' and gave a call of 'Do or Die' to his countrymen for the achievement of freedom. Mahatma Gandhi and all leading congressmen were arrested. The Punjab energetically responded to the call of Mahatma Gandhi. Students both boys and girls, unhesitatingly came forward. It was the city of Lahore that on November 10, 1942 one hundred and four students were arrested. This number included twenty two girls." During the movement Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur, Amar Kaur and Pushpa Gujral played an important role. Apart from these, Smt. Lajawati (wife of Hem Ra), Smt. Lakshmi Devi (wife of Om Parkash Trikha), Smt. Savitri Devi (wife of Ram Krishan) held a demonstration in Anarkali, Lahore. They due to raising congress slogans and singing national songs were arrested at Lahore by the police while they marched with the national flag. Smt. Satyavati (wife of Achint Ram) was also there and she was also arrested along with her son and twelve year old daughter. Another congress lady worker of Lahore Smt. Parvati Devi was arrested on the same day.

During the Second World War, with the aim to attain the independence of India, Indian National Army, commonly known as INA, was organized under the leadership of General Mohan Singh and Subhash Chander Bose. He realized the importance of participation of women in I.N.A. So a women's Regiment was formed, which later popularly known as the Rani Jhansi Regiment'. Therefore some important Punjabi women - Ajaib Kaur, Amar Kaur and Bhagwan Kaur very keenly took part in Indian National Army with the Rani Jhansi Regiment.

Ajaib Kaur, wife of Niranjjan Singh became the part of section of Indian women as its President and joined the struggle of Independence at Hong Kong. Smt. Amar Kaur, wife of Rur Singh, joined I.N.A. in Rani Jhansi Regiment in China and worked for about three years. While Bhagwan Kaur wife of Kesar Singh donated dollars in thousands to INA fund. She too served I.N.A. in the Rani Jhansi Regiment

<sup>11</sup>Hukam Singh, *The Punjab Problem*, Dhunna Press, New Delhi, 1960, p-40.



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and surrendered to British forces in 1945. It is generally believed that nearly 70% of the I.N.A. personnel belonged to the Punjab<sup>12</sup>.

Day by day the differences increased between Indian National Congress and Muslim League. Ultimately, Lord Mountbatten became the viceroy on March 24, 1947. The situation was very tense at this time as a strong agitation for partition was set in motion by the Muslim League.

On August 15, 1947 India got its independence while Punjab was partitioned into East and West Punjab. During the partition, the Punjabi men and women, who witnessed a great deal of human misery, showed an undaunted spirit of endurance whether it was in the refugee camps or marching in caravans or in the process of rehabilitation. They took the partition as a challenge and started with the task of reconstruction with a new confidence and determination. Thus the awakened Punjabi women were mostly belonging to well-placed political and elite families, took keen interest in the freedom struggle. The striking number of women held responsible positions in independent India. It's one of the best examples in the context of the Punjab was Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur who became Union Health Minister in 1947.

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<sup>12</sup>Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikh*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1963, p-39