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ROLE OF PUNJABI WOMEN – IN THE LAST BATTLE OF SWARAJ (1929 – 47)

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Role of Punjabi Women – In the Last Battle of Swaraj (1929 – 47)

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Abstract – As in life, so in history, women get relatively lesser place in our male-dominated society. In the 1920s, the struggle for our freedom became a mass movement. Almost every class, community and group was attracted towards it and their representatives joined it in pretty large numbers. How could the Indian women lag behind in such a situation? In other words, the main effort here is to see how the Punjabi women reacted to the Gandhian struggle for swaraj during this period, the last fight for swaraj. The social base of women's struggle for it increases manifold in this period. This phenomenon and several other issues such as Muslim Women's effort in working for the division of the country etc. are explained at length here.

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The year 1929 opened on a very hectic note in the Indian politics. It was again Punjab which was responsible for generating a lot of heat that had made this happen this way. A large crowd had gathered at Lahore when the Simon Commission visited the city in October last. The crowd, led by Lala Lajpat Rai, was peaceful: it only showed its resentment on the point that no Indian members were there on the Commission. The procession was lathi-charged in which even Lalaji was seriously injured. He died as a result of these injuries on 17 November 1928. This triggered off unprecedented anger everywhere. The people of Punjab were the worst affected. They wanted to have no truck with British government which had killed their leader.

In 1929, the Congress met at Lahore. Pt. JawaharLal Nehru presided over it. And among the many resolutions, a historic resolution was passed – that India will now strive to get complete freedom – 'Purana Swaraj'. The people were happy at this change throughout the country and as desired by the Congress, they observed the Purana Swaraj day on 26 January 1930. Punjab was no exception. A big public meeting was held in Lahore. After doing all sorts of preliminary work, it gave a clarion call to the nation for Civil Disobedience Movement against the Government. Gandhiji as usual was the leading light behind the whole show and therefore, he led it. The Civil Disobedience in short meant defiance of the salt laws made by the Government for preparing salt, refusal to pay land revenue, picketing of shops selling foreign cloth, wine, etc. Put simply, Gandhiji had asked every Indian to prepare salt and start the movement wherever he was. The people throughout Punjab did it in a big way. There was good response

and result. There were meetings at almost every city and towns. Even some villages did it.

Happily our women took prominent part in such meetings almost everywhere throughout the province. An incident of about this very time is worth noticing. A meeting was held at Gujaranwala on 5 April 1930 for exhorting the people to defy the Government. Maulana Zafar Ali Khan presided over it. A gift pack was sent by some woman from Punjab to the President along with a letter. The box contained some glass bangle. And the letter gave the purpose of sending this peculiar gift to the President who happened to be a man and not a woman who wore bangles. The purpose was to exhort the manhood of Punjab to act. And if they for some reason or the other could not, then the gift – bangles – was surely for them: "If men could not liberate India, they should put on the bangles"

On 11 April the Salt Laws were broken at the historic capital of Punjab, Lahore: Openly, loudly and challengingly. The Tribune says that one Shanta Kumari, a young girl, not yet out of her teens, offered herself to carry on this defiance campaign by breaking Salt Laws. Later, another young girl Lado Rani Zutshi broke Salt Laws at Lahore. Unlike the earlier occasions, the Muslim women also participated in the present movement. Begum Alam, a Muslim woman, of over 50 years in age, came without Burqa on the stage in a public meeting at Lahore and exhorted other Muslim women to do the same and join the movement in large numbers. There was positive response. At Sangla Hills, Begum Fatima, wife of Comrade Hussain Shah came out to fight the British Imperialism along with her Sister-in-law. There were many more such brave actions throughout the

Province. Besides preparing salt the Punjab women also took out processions and helped in organizing protest meetings and hartals. They took to picketing of shops selling foreign clothes and liquor.

To discourage people to do such activities the Government invariably promulgated Section 144 banning gatherings or more than five persons at a place. Our women defied such orders courageously at a number of places. The Tribune documents that such daring acts were done at a number of places. All these measures had very effect on the movement as a whole. Moreover, it gave inspiration to their men folks. Oh, if the women did it, why not they : Some women even shamed the men who did not come out to do their part in the struggle for freedom of their motherland and remained loyalists doing all sorts of bad jobs for their 'master'. It is heartening that women in a region like Haryana which was far, far backward in every respect than its upper Punjab, also played significant role during this movement. Bhiwani was the centre of great political activity in district Hisar. On 13 April a meeting was held here to prepare Salt. Hundreds of people came. The beginning was made by applying Tilak on the forehead of 'Law breakers' by – 13 year old girl glad in total Khaddar. On 15th April, there was hartal in Hisar. The volunteers went from house to house to get pledges signed by women to go for Swadeshi only. 240 women signed pledges. Mrs. Chand Bai, wife of L. Sham Lal played leading role in the movement. The bonfire of foreign cloth was done at Hisar in which women also took part in same numbers. At Ambala Vidyavati, daughter of Lala Duni Chand Ambalavi led women to prepare salt.

The Government took these activities of the women a bit seriously and indulged in a reign of repression. Many of them were put behind the bars. Among the brave women who suffered jail term the prominent ones were : Lado Rani Zutshi, Chand Bai, Vidyavati, Kasturi Bai, Laxmi Arya, Saraswati Devi, Kartar Kaur, Atma Devi, Ram Piari, Raghbir Kaur, Usha Devi, Parbati Devi (Kamalia), Pushpa Gujral, to name few.

On 5 March 1931, the battle of Swaraj came to a grinding halt. There was Gandhi-Irwin Pact not to fight. The women, however, did not fail the movement in any way. They did their jobs as usual : they organized meetings and processions, dharnas and picketing before the shops selling foreign clothes and wine. They effected bonfires of foreign clothes and exhorted one and all to use Swadeshi things. Many of them left Government Schools and in some cases even resignations were given from Government service. Women volunteers were recruited and sent for Satya-graha as before. Interestingly, as the Congress organization was banned by the Government, the prominent Congress men were given the charge of their respectable locales to conduct the movement. They were called 'dictators'. Happily, we have evidence that a large number of women served as 'dictators' and conducted the movement at number of places as the following Table (1) shows:

Table 1

Congress's Women Dictators in Punjab in the Civil Disobedience Movement

Region		Women Dictator
Lahore	-	Swadesh Kumari
Amritsar	-	Bhagwati
Okara	-	Anand Kumari
Jhang	-	Laxmi Trikha
Kasur	-	Durga Devi
Hisar	-	Sohani Devi
Bhiwani	-	Mohini Devi ²⁶

Besides them, some women leaders like Mrs. Gopichand Bhargava, Vidyavati, Shanta Devi and Kaushalya Devi, Sushila Devi and Durga Devi were appointed dictators to run the movement at the Provincial level also. On 1 August 1933, Gandhiji changed the character of the movement. It was no more a mass movement now – it was individual Satyagraha. Although several women courted arrest in the new phase also, the movement remained lusterless on the whole. And finally it petered. Whatever, one might say the Punjab women played a good role in the Civil Disobedience Movement.

There is always a lull before the storm. Punjab also experienced such a situation in the post-civil disobedience movement days. There was no political activity in the arena of political protest and agitation. Only constructive programme, such as Harijan upliftment work, spreading of education and working against social evils, like drinking etc. was taken to by the Congress activists during this period. All these things were after the hearts of women activists and therefore, they took to these works until they were called upon to do another work. The second World War broke out on 3 September 1939. The Viceroy of India declared soon after that India was also on War against the Axis powers without asking the people of India. The nationalists were angered at this development. The Congress Working Committee met in Delhi on September 15, 1939 and urged British Government to make a declaration of India's Independence so that they could help the War effort. The Government declined to do so. As a result, the Congress opposed the Government's War efforts. On the positive plan the Congress demanded Swaraj so that Indians could contribute substantially to the War effort as free people. The Government did not listen to them. Therefore the Congress felt that it was necessary to start the Civil Disobedience campaign. According to the majority of the Congress leaders it

could only be carried on under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. On 15 September 1940 the All India Congress Committee gave the Mahatma a mandate to take necessary action in the matter.

On 11 October 1940 the Congress leaders assembled in Wardha. Gandhiji gave his mind to start Individual Civil Disobedience, coupled if need be with his own fast. The Congress Working Committee finally approved the Gandhian Scheme. And on 17 October, 1940 Gandhiji launched his third movement, the historic Individual Satyagraha. According to this novel protest movement, a person was asked to go out in the street shouting anti-war slogans to get himself or herself arrested. The movement was inaugurated by Vinoba Bhave. He made anti-war speeches on 17 October 1940. He was immediately arrested soon others followed suit. Punjab was no exception. Several of the Punjabis offered for Satyagraha and landed in jails.

In Punjab Iftikharuddin, the then President of the PCC, was the first Satyagrahi to court arrest, and to Bhagdevi, MLA goes the honour of being the first Satyagrahi among the women. The second woman Satyagrahi was Bibi Raghbir Kaur, MLA who courted arrest on 8 December 1940. Although many women offered for Satyagraha in the first phase of the struggle, these two alone were permitted to go for it. In the second phase which began with 27 January 1941, Vidyakumari, wife of Ram Bheja Mal, pleader from Lahore was the first to offer arrest – on 29 January itself. Then came Parabati Devi Kamalia's turn – she was arrested on 30 January 1941. Nine more came forward in February. They were Bibi Amar Kaur, Lal Devi Sondhi, Chand Bai, Puran Devi, Kasturi Bai, Laxmi Trikha, Fareda Bedi, Sham Devi and Lal Devi. The third phase of the movement started in March 1941. Savitri Devi inaugurated it by her arrest on 10 March. Many more came in soon the prominent among whom were Chandervati, wife of Lala Harkishan Lal, Sita Devi of Okara, Gopal Devi from Batala, Sohag Rani of Lahore, Puran Devi, Laxmi Arya, all from Haryana, Bhagwanti and Vidyavati from Amritsar, Pushpa Gujral from Jhelum and Begam of Sheikhpura. On the whole the Individual Satyagraha proved to be a tame affair. After June the movement came to almost a halt. The Congress leadership knew this fact a little too well and it thought of going for something more effective, and more dynamic in its place.

The Individual Satyagraha dragged on somehow or the other for about 15 months when it was suspended by Gandhiji. Soon after all the Satyagrahis were released from jail. Broadly speaking, the Satyagraha was not a success. It had no impact on the British Government at all.

Gandhiji, sensing the resentment in his countrymen after the Individual Satyagraha proved to be a non-

successful affair, launched on 8 August 1941, the historic 'Quit India Movement' when the British were asked to leave India lock stock and barrel right at once. The war time situation compelled the British Government to take prompt action. And they did it : right in the early hours of the next day – 9 August – they arrested all the top leaders of the Congress. But that was the wrong way to suppress the rising. Almost the entire country was afire. Punjab, too, did not lag behind. The Punjabi women came out in almost every city/town and even villages and organized meetings and get-togethers to propagate against the Government. There were prohibitory orders at a number of places for holding conferences, meetings, processions etc. Yet they assembled and defied orders. Subhadra daughter of Satyavati, Lajjawati, Raghbir Kaur, Bhag Devi, Vidyavati, Prakash Kaur, Shakuntla Devi, Parbati Kamalia, Savitri Devi, Rameshwari Nehru and Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur played prominent part there. In Haryana region Chand Bai, Kasturi Bai, Chitra Devi, Dhanpa, Darkan, Laxmi Arya, Mohini Devi, Sohani Devi, played important part. All of them were arrested. At Bhalot, a village near Rohtak, one Hari Ram went to jail along with his wife, mother and his wife gave birth to a daughter in the jail itself. It was indeed an inspiring story.

In the absence of leaders, and for other reasons which do not lie within the preview of this discussion, the Quit India Movement was weak in Punjab. Despite that, it dragged on for some time but after about a year it petered out. Relatively speaking the Quit India Movement was not as spectacular as the other Gandhian movements were. But still it made an impact on the people and loosened the hold of the British over India. The women in Punjab played an important role in the freedom struggle from 1930 to 1947. Sometimes the movement was pretty strong, sometimes it was not so strong or it was weak. But still it went a long way in bringing freedom nearer to its doorstep.

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