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**Jasbir Singh**  
Assistant Professor,  
Department of History,  
Panjab University,  
Chandigarh, India

## Women and anti-colonial struggle: Role in the Akali movement

**Jasbir Singh**

### Abstract

Women in Indian literature and tradition have been assigned subordinate and subservient positions in the patriarchal structure. They are not supposed to move beyond the four walls of domesticity and male dictation. Sikh philosophy provided much-needed space for the liberation of women and a respectable position which is essential for the making of an egalitarian society. Furthermore, the armed anti-establishment struggle steered by Sikh Gurus and then furthered by their followers further provided a window for the women to prove their mettle in the battlefield also. When the anti-colonial struggle started in Punjab, Sikh women participated wholeheartedly since its inception in different capacities. The present paper attempts to delineate the role of women in the Namdhari and Akali Movements during the days of anti-colonial struggle.

**Keywords:** Women, colonialism, anti-colonial, patriarchy, Akali Movement, Sikh women, sacrifice, struggle

### Introduction

Indian texts have essentialized women as devoted and self-sacrificing, yet occasionally rebellious and dangerous. Generally, women were destined to play subordinate and supportive roles <sup>[1]</sup>. In early Indian tradition, it was believed that “women should be honoured and adorned by their fathers, brothers, and husbands if they desire their own welfare” <sup>[2]</sup>. But women as a whole were confined to the four walls of domesticity: either depicted as objects of household or woven into love tales. Occasionally Indian texts and historical narratives singled out women for special attention but usually, this was because their accomplishments were significant by male standards <sup>[3]</sup>. When women attempt to redefine their roles and expand the arena of choices, their perceptions and actions generate reverberations throughout the entire society, necessitating a re-ordering of not only gender roles and arrangements but also of the social and political order affecting the culture and the collectivity and its self-definition and identity. Thus, history’s oldest oppression and cleavage/ fault line is shaken at its very roots <sup>[4]</sup>.

### Sikhism and Women

The holy message of Guru Nanak and his successors repudiated the stereotypical image of women and provided much-needed relief to women. They condemned the vices related to women: Sati, dowry, polygamy and child marriage etc. “Affirmation of the dignity of the human being, male as well as female, was central to Guru Nanak’s teaching. His mystical vision of the immanence of the Creator in all of His creation was concretized in a forceful enunciation of the gospel of equality” <sup>[5]</sup>. Gradually women became part and parcel of the Sikh tradition. Moreover, the Sikh women demonstrated exceptional heroism and chivalry during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and they stood against every tyranny and did not relinquish their faith. George Thomas states in his memories: “Instances have not infrequently occurred in which Sikh women have taken up arms to defend their habitation from the desultory attacks of the enemy, and throughout the contest behaved themselves with an intrepidity of spirit that was highly praiseworthy” <sup>[6]</sup>.”

The Sikhs throughout the freedom struggle from 1857 to 1947 vigorously participated in the contest. The recent research has eroded the base of the myth of the non-participation of the Sikhs in the revolt of 1857. The last to lay arms and foremost to raise them against the British, the Sikhs of Punjab may not figure prominently in the galaxy of freedom fighters led by Mahatma Gandhi barring Shaheed Bhagat Singh, who, too, “was consistently disowned

**Corresponding Author:**  
**Jasbir Singh**  
Assistant Professor,  
Department of History,  
Panjab University,  
Chandigarh, India

by Bapu” but the contribution of the Sikh people to the freedom struggle is no mean <sup>[7]</sup>. The notion of martyrdom is very much basic to the Sikh discourse. This is a fundamental feature of Sikh tradition, “representing a doctrine which has been in place for the last five centuries. According to present-day tradition, the idea was first consciously emphasized by the Sikh Gurus, in particular Guru Nanak, and exemplified by Guru martyrs and countless brave Sikhs who had suffered death while opposing the tyranny of an over-whelming enemy <sup>[8]</sup>.” The Sikh community as whole both men and women have maintained this tradition in every age and period. Consider the following lines about Rani Sahib Kaur by Prof. Mohan Singh:

Likhya Sahib Kaur ne Anta Rao tani,  
Main nagin, danga jisnu nahi mangda pani,  
Main Chandi Gobind Singh di, vairi dal khani,  
Main kar kar suttan dakre sabh teri dhani,  
Main chung chung doke burian de chadi jawani,  
Main lad lad nal bahadran de hoi siyani,  
Main shihani Panj Darya di mainu kalli na jani <sup>[9]</sup>.

### Women during the British Rule

The position of the women on the eve of the British conquest had reached its lowest ebb. There was a peculiar feudal structure emphasizing inequality based on birth, age and sex. This was again rigidified into a steel frame as a consequence of external forces of invasion carrying foreign elements of religion and social custom, internal wars and other emerging religious and political forces <sup>[10]</sup>. The emergence of Renaissance in the nineteenth century opened the eyes of Indian intelligentsia to the disgraceful social conditions of their own people especially that of women <sup>[11]</sup>. The status and position of women in India were one of the parameters adopted by Indian and British reformers to quantify the degree of modernization. The stereotypical image of Indian women was that of a tradition-bound, meticulously religious, and subservient position. She functioned in an environment, which was considered by the Christian missionaries as dull and monotonous with limited opportunity for self-expression <sup>[12]</sup>. Colonial histories have narrated the civilizing mission of the British as rescuing the women from their own culture and society <sup>[13]</sup>. Socio-religious reform movements heralded a new era for the upliftment of women. Moreover, under British rule, the introduction of a market economy, a modern educational system, and the new values of equality, rationality, secularism, and respect for personality generated a new climate pressing for a change in the old feudal structure <sup>[14]</sup>. The British rule in India faced the first major challenge in the form of the rebellion of 1857 in which the women, though few in number, made their presence and Rani Laxmi Bai of Jhansi emerged as the metaphor of resistance to the colonial authority.

The Sikh women continued their early tradition of participation in the struggle against tyranny during the British rule as well. Baba Ram Singh, the founder of Namdhari Movement aimed not only on religious and social reform but the achievement of self-rule was the underlying objective. He favoured upliftment of the women and their equal participation. He divided Punjab into 22 Subas and nominated Suba to each. Bibi Hukami was one of them. Baba Ram Singh evolved the concepts of Swadeshi and Non-Cooperation as organizational apparatus. Namdhari

women participated in this non-cooperation movement. Among them were Bibi Hukmi, Bibi Inder Kaur and Bibi Khem Kaur. They used to sing: *Mohe marne ka chau hai, Maron tan hari ke Duar* <sup>[15]</sup>.

Bibi Inder Kaur and Khem Kaur were members of the *jatha* which attacked the fort of Maloudh to procure arms. The attempt failed and they proceeded to Malerkotla where a skirmish with the police took place. Men were blown with canons on 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> January 1872 and Bibi Inder Kaur and Bibi Khem Kaur were arrested and detained at Bahadurgarh for two years <sup>[16]</sup>. Namdhari women also participated in the boycott of foreign goods. Bibi Ram Kaur dedicated herself to this cause. Police kept surveillance on her house. Bibi Bhagan accompanied Baba Ram Singh during his different visits. She was arrested in 1872. Bibi Karmo was active in the Gujranwala district and was also arrested later. The house of Bibi Ram Kaur was a centre of secret activities of the Namdharis. After his detention at Rangoon, Baba Ram Singh gave directions to Namdhari men and women through letters and they continued their struggle <sup>[17]</sup>.

### Women in the Akali Movement

The Jallianwala Bagh Massacre of April 1919 changed the political scenario in Punjab. Now the political leadership of the Sikhs went out of the hands of elitist and loyalist Sikhs and it was shifted to the Akali Dal which was formed in 1920. The Akali Dal formally committed itself to the cause of freedom by supporting Gandhi's call for non-cooperation with the British <sup>[18]</sup>. The Akalis started their struggle with Gurdwara reform. This was very vital part of Sikh's fight for freedom because these holy places have always been the very lifeblood of the Sikh way of life. The awakening brought by the Singh Sabha Movement had made the Sikhs aware about their rights <sup>[19]</sup>. This motivation created a popular upsurge in the shape of the Akali Movement <sup>[20]</sup>. Gurdwara Reform Movement though ostensibly organized for reform in Sikh shrines, had also political dimensions in it, as much as it was a protest against the government interference in the Gurdwara affairs in connivance with the *Mahants*. The Sikhs were provoked by these *Mahants* or the clergymen who had come into control of the Sikh holy shrines and converted ecclesiastical assets into private properties <sup>[21]</sup>. All this was being done with the patronage of British government. In 1881, the Lieutenant Governor of Punjab wrote to the Viceroy Lord Rippon: “To allow the management of the Sikh Gurdwaras in the hands of such a committee which is free from government control, will harmful politically. I hope His Majesty will issue some orders to retain the system which is running successfully for more than thirty years” <sup>[22]</sup>. Thus inevitably, while attempting to free the gurdwaras from the clerical control, the Sikhs came into clash with the government <sup>[23]</sup>. The Gurdwara Reform Movement was not only successful in freeing the gurdwaras but also had important political consequences in the institutionalization of Sikh politics <sup>[24]</sup>. For Sardul Singh Kaveeshar, freedom of religion and freedom of the country went together. He regarded the Akali Movement as ‘only an offshoot of the national movement’ <sup>[25]</sup>.

The movement witnessed some participation of the women although it was low. Anyone who heard the call to protect and safeguard the Granth and Gurdwara (the two greatest objects of veneration by the entire community), was

prepared to risk his or her life and became an Akali. It is a significant fact that in adopting the role of Akali, no sex distinction was observed <sup>[26]</sup>. The Akali women were able to make a significant presence in the movement even though in normal times the political participation of women in rural Punjab was low. The participation of women in this movement became possible because the men of the community were willing to release them from domestic responsibilities so that they could strengthen the movement <sup>[27]</sup>. Thus, the Sikh women did not lag behind their men and willingly sacrificed themselves and their children by taking part in the movement in a non-violent way. Their joint struggle forced the British to yield. Wife of Bhai Lachman Singh Dharowali was the first woman to be part of an Akali *jatha* who accompanied her husband to Shri Nankana Sahib. They were joined by other two women on the way <sup>[28]</sup>. Mata Kishan Kaur was another brave Sikh woman who participated in the freedom struggle of the country. She was born in 1856 to Sardar Suba Singh and Mai Sobhan of village Lohgar, Ludhiana District. She had learnt Gurmukhi Script, Gurbani and Sikh history from the Sikh priest of her local Gurudwara. She was a religious-minded girl, even in her childhood. When she grew up, she was married to Sardar Harnan Singh of village Kaonke. He joined the army as a soldier and died in service in 1902. She had two sons and one daughter, but as luck would have it, all three died before their father's death. Thus, she was left an issueless widow. Rather than feeling lonely and bearing the curses of being a widow, she spent the rest of her life in the service of her community <sup>[29]</sup>.

In 1922, Sikhs started a non-violent movement against the Mahant to take possession of Guru Ka Bagh Gurudwara near Amritsar <sup>[30]</sup>. It was here that the Akalis were able to demonstrate the efficacy of the weapon of peaceful *satyagraha* by their strict adherence to the vow of non-violence and thus set a new example to inspire the forces of nationalism in the country <sup>[31]</sup>. Bands of non-violent unarmed Sikhs who proceeded towards the gurudwara were beaten and even run down by the mounted policeman favouring the Mahant. They even broke the bones of Sikhs under the hooves of their horses <sup>[32]</sup>. Mata Kishan Kaur and her party took in their hands, the service of the injured Sikhs. They took them to the hospitals and nursing homes. She administered first aid to them and took care of them. She even hit a policeman in the face as he taunted her when she was looking after the injured Sikhs <sup>[33]</sup>. During Jaito Morcha, Mata Kaonke was a member of the volunteer force that collected the ration for the besieged Sikhs and served them. She dressed herself as a Jain woman and moved into the police camp and the Gurudwara. She collected intelligence about the police plans and preparations. She informed the band of martyrs <sup>[34]</sup>. Based on her information, the leader of the band changed his course and proceeded towards Gurudwara Tibbi Sahib instead of going to Gurudwara Gang Sar. State police also reached there and barred entry even to that Gurudwara. The police opened fire on the band, killing some and injuring many. Mata Kishan Kaur, with her associates, attended to the wounded. The police secretly disposed of the dead bodies and removed some of the injured to some secret place. It did not give correct information about the dead or injured Sikhs to the people. Mata Kishan Kaur who had seen all this made the facts public. Her details embarrassed the government. The secret police traced her and charged her with espionage.

She, along with her associates was prosecuted and sentenced to four years of rigorous imprisonment in May 1924. She died in 1952 <sup>[35]</sup>.

The ruler of Nabha state Ripudaman Singh was forced to abdicate in favour of his minor son on July 9, 1923 <sup>[36]</sup>. This forced abdication led to a strong agitation among the Sikhs. The British officials also interrupted Akhand Path started by the Sikhs to pray for the restoration of the rights of Maharaja Ripudaman Singh. It was decided to send *jathas* from Akal Takht to Jaito for completing an Akhand Path as a matter of right. On 21st February 1923, a special *jatha* of 500 Akalis was sent to Jaito and its departure was witnessed by 30000 people <sup>[37]</sup>. Every one of them took a pledge to remain non-violent even if fired or tortured and to start the Akhand Path at the Gurudwara at Jaito. The number of volunteers was much more than required and thousands were asked to wait for their turn. Ladies were not allowed to proceed with the band, but they insisted to participate in such a holy endeavour. They succeeded to accompany the band on their plea that they would cook food on the way. Bibi Balbir Kaur, with her two-year-old son, was the leader of the women volunteers. But as soon as the party entered the boundary of the Nabha state, it was warned by the state police and the British forces not to proceed forward <sup>[38]</sup>.

Bibi Balbir Kaur continued her march hugging her child. With a smile on her face, she was waiting for the bullet she had eagerly awaited so far. Suddenly a bullet hit her in her forehead. Her face was covered with blood. She did not stop and continued the march while her innocent child played with the flowing blood on her face. A stray bullet struck the child in her arm. The bullet pierced the child through his ear. The child died in an instant. She kissed his forehead and placed his dead body along with the other wounded and killed. Saying, "O God, take back your charge temporarily entrusted to me," she rushed forward along with the members of the band, encouraging them to face the bullets bravely <sup>[39]</sup>. Her face turned yellow for the loss of blood, and her steps were unsteady, but she kept her pace with others. After reaching the Gurudwara she bowed her head to God and thanked Him for giving her a chance to reach there. On February 21, 1924, suddenly a bullet hit straight her chest and pierced her body. This bullet was the message that she had been waiting eagerly. The agitation continued for twenty-one months and many bands of five hundred each followed one another. In the end, the British government yielded <sup>[40]</sup>.

The Sikh women provided moral support to their men and encouraged them to continue the spirit of service and sacrifice for their motherland. Consider the following instance: "A batch of Akalis was being deported from Lahore to a distant place outside the Punjab. There were two women among the people who had gathered to see their relatives off. The two women silently watched and wept and nobody paid attention to them. When the train started moving, the duo ran after the train and virtually fell down. The old woman was the mother of an Akali prisoner and the young girl was his wife who was married a few months before the arrest. As a usual routine, the petty officials would harass the women after the disappearance of the guardian of the family. Then a senior officer approached them and suggested that all their sufferings would end if their son or husband gives a humiliating undertaking not to associate him with the Akali agitation. The women replied heroically that they would see their men die than ask them

to stoop so low <sup>[41]</sup>.”

### Conclusion

Thus, the women played a very vital role in the Akali Movement either as active participants in the nonviolent struggle or by running the household with responsibility in the wake of the absence of their men. The liberating ideas of Baba Ram Singh served as a catapult for the women's participation in the Namdhari Movement and pushed the boundaries of their political sphere. During the Akali Movement, these women dedicated themselves to the cause, even though the movement had nothing to offer women as women. The repression unleashed by the British government on their men was a more important causal factor for their participation than any of the political demands. They repeatedly said that they had joined the movement to do *sewa* or service, to give rather than to take. The bravery and steadfastness of these simple, illiterate women had been the main strength of the Movement. Thus, these women rechristened the Sikh tradition of bravery, sacrifice and service to the humanity <sup>[42]</sup>.

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