WOMEN IN COLONIAL PUNJAB
(1901-47)

ABSTRACT

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Supervised by :
Jaspal Kaur Dhanju
Professor

Submitted by :
Parneet Hayer

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
PUNJABI UNIVERSITY, PATIALA
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Woman is the companion of man gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the minutest details of the activities of man and she has the same right of freedom and liberty as he.\(^1\) She is the foundation of all that is beautiful and desirable and leads to power. The mothers of the race are its makers and unless their condition is healthy, the race cannot be expected to be anything better. Healthy here includes all that makes life enjoyable, progressive and potent. The efficiency and prosperity of a social or political unit must eventually be a reflex of the efficiency and prosperity of its women.\(^2\) Thus, the future of India largely depends on the education and welfare of the women and this view is widely shared by both the men and women in the country.\(^3\) Hence, a woman is a vital part of a society and to have in-depth knowledge about the social structure of any civilization, exploration and investigation of woman is a must.

Thus, to realise the importance of women in Punjab, the topic *Women in Colonial Punjab (1901-47)* for the dissertation has been selected. *Women in Colonial Punjab (1901-47)* discusses the women in general and is not based on any specific class, caste, creed or religion. The present study makes an attempt to critically analyse the

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emancipation, development and enlightenment of the women during
the colonial rule of the Britishers in Punjab. How the women got
affected during the colonial rule under the Britishers? is the main
question which is raised and tried to answer in the dissertation. These
forty seven years from 1901-47 were not only important for the history
of Punjab but the history of women also got transformed in these
years.

The sources used in completing the dissertation are divided into
two types-primary and secondary sources. The primary sources are
comprised of the census reports of India and Punjab (1901, 1911,
1921, 1931 and 1941); Punjab District Gazetteers of Jalandhar,
Ludhiana, Hoshiarpur, Gujranwala, Lahore, Multan and others. The
Imperial Gazetteer of India (1908); Education reports of India (1907
onwards); Report on the Administration of Punjab and its
dependencies (1849 onwards); Towards Equality : Report on the
Status of Women in India; Indian Quarterly and Annual Registers
(1919 onwards); Report of the Commissioners of the Indian National
Congress (1920); Punjab Disturbances Report (1920); Disorders
Inquiry Committee Report (1920) and other relevant reports.

The Gurmukhi sources like vernacular print media of the
Punjab have also been consulted like Istri, Istri Rattan, Istri Sudhar,
Istri Samachar, Istri Satsang, Azad Bhain, Punjabi Bhain, Punjab,
Bhujangan Pattar, Pritam-Masik Pattar, Ranjit Nagara and others. The
Reports of the Chief Khalsa Diwan, Central Khalsa Yateem Khanna, Sikh Educational Conferences and others are also taken into account. Newspaper *The Tribune* and weekly magazine *The People* both in English published from Lahore have been consulted.

In the secondary sources all the books relevant to the topic are explored. The above mentioned sources and some other sources have been thoroughly sifted and analysed in this work. To make the study effective and meaningful every effort has been made to go through the relevant and important sources available in English and Punjabi. Besides, the works of modern historians have also been consulted and a comparative analysis has been made.

The dissertation is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter is 'Historical Background' deals with women in Punjab when the Britishers annexed the province in 1849. A brief idea about the condition and status of women in Punjab is given from 1849-1901. Various questions are raised and answered in this chapter like – what was the condition of women at the advent of Britishers? Which were the social evil customs prevalent in the society pertaining to women? Which were the socio-religious reform movements were working for women's cause? and many more.

All the social evil customs prevalent in the society mainly pertaining to women are discussed. Female infanticide, child marriage, mismatched marriages, enforced widowhood, polygamy, sati
system, purdah system, women trafficking and others are thoroughly studied. All these evils were retarding the growth of the women in society and efforts of the Britishers to make society rid of these evils are also mentioned. Like John Lawrence, the Chief Commissioner of Punjab from 1853-59 promulgated three new commandments:

"Bewa mat jalao,
Beti mat maro,
Korhi mat dabao."\(^4\)

(It means not to burn widow, not to kill daughter and not to bury alive the leper.)

To elaborate and make work more interesting even the illustrations are also added in the chapter from a magazine *Phulwari – Masik Pattar* of 1930s. Pictures of mismatched marriages of old man and young girl, educated man and uneducated girl and vice-versa are given in the chapter.

Apart from the efforts of Britishers, various socio-religious reform movements are mentioned like Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, the Ninankari movement, the Namdhari movement, the Singh Sabha movement and others. Male reformers of the province alongwith the government tried to help the women. The reformers worked on the Victorian construct of woman as a helpmate of the man and an educated woman, free from the shackles of purdah, accomplished in

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domestic skills, devoted to the husband and family, an intelligent companion, an ideal mother, producer and nurturer of a strong masculine race and custodian of tradition.

In the end of the chapter three kind of approaches are discussed to study the women in Punjab. The Nationalist school developed the idea that nationalism was a unified and collective opposition of the Indian nation against the common enemy represented by the British rule. The emancipation of women was due to the efforts of the Indian leaders not of the Britishers. The Cambridge school narrated the civilizing mission of the British as rescuing Indian women from their own culture and society. The subaltern studies looked into the efforts of women themselves. They re-read and re-wrote history from women's point of view.

The second chapter of dissertation entitled, 'Women Awareness and Vernacular Press', discusses the contribution of nine vernacular journals and newspapers in creating consciousness and awareness amongst the women of Punjab. *Azad Bhain* (published from Rawalpindi), *Istri, Istri Sudhar, Istri Satsang, Phuleran, Sughar Saheli* (all from Amritsar), *Istri Ratan* (Layalpur), *Istri Samachar* (Quetta) and *Punjabi Bhain* (Ferozepur) were the journals and newspapers whose main aims and objectives are discussed thoroughly. Information about

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their publication, subscription and editors is given in the chapter. All of them in one or the other way played a pivotal role in recasting and redefining the image of women in Punjab. Most of these were edited by the males but sometimes they had co-opted their wives as editors like of *Punjabi Bhain* (Bhai Takhat Singh of Ferozepur co-opted his wife Bibi Harnam Kaur as the editor). In mid of 1920s even some of the ladies started their own magazines and became their editors like Sardarni Bhagwan Kaur of *Istri* and Bibi Kartar Kaur of *Istri Sudhar*.

Alongwith aims and objectives, all the major issues and themes depicted by the vernacular print media are also discussed. Female infanticide, purdah, sati, enforced widowhood, child marriage and other issues are debated in the work. Thus, all the social conditions discussed in the print media are elaborated in the chapter. But with the passage of time, when the country was facing the struggle for independence, then the editorials, tales, stories and news related to politics were regularly published.

Some issues like of female education was always debated in almost all the magazines. The print media in early twentieth century launched a fierce campaign for creating awareness among the people about the need of female education. Like *Istri Vidya Par Vichar*8 article in *Istri* tried to mobilize people about the education of girls and suggestions were given about kind of education which was needed—domestic, art and craft and religious.

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8  *Istri*, Amritsar, April, 1932, p. 8.
Various matrimonial advertisements were also published under
the heading of 'Purushan Layi Vidhwa Istriyan Di Lor'.
This made women aware about the existence of widow remarriages in different
parts of the Punjab.

Contemporary news of importance from social, economic and
political fields were regularly published in these journals. The print
media threw light on varied aspects pertaining to women and had a
great impact on them. This later also made them aware about the
political events happening in the other parts of India.

The third chapter 'Women : From Education to Occupation' is
concerned with the journey of women as students to the working
ladies. Before the advent of Britishers, the stress laid on the education
of girls was limited to religious knowledge only. But after the
Britishers, people with the efforts of colonial rulers tried to widen the
scope of education for girls.

In 1856, Department of Public instruction in the Punjab was
instituted with Mr. W. Arnold as the first Director.
The department
then scrutinized all the major obstacles in the way of female
education-conservatism, prejudice reinforced by purdah system, the
custom of early marriage and others. After that various schools were
opened by the government and people of the province. Like

10 Report on the Administration of the Punjab and its dependencies for 1901-02, Lahore, Punjab
Government High schools of Ambala, Gujranwala, Moga, Hissar; Sikh Kanya Mahavidyalaya of Ferozepur (by Bhai Takhat Singh in 1894), Kanya Mahavidyalaya of Jalandhar and many more.

These schools imparted both skilled and non-skilled education among the women and later the women who got educated took further steps to improve the condition of their sisters. The education efforts of the Britishers, the male reformers and the educated women of Punjab made females aware and they adopted new professions in teaching, law, medicine and others. It can be seen from the research done that women in the profession of teaching, law and medicine from 1901 to 1941 increased by 12.52%, 2.4% and 11.01% respectively. Thus, a journey of women from education to occupation is discussed in the chapter.

The fourth chapter 'The Emergence of Organisations and Associations for Women Emancipation' had been devoted to the various organisations and associations which were either formed by the men or women for the welfare of women. The social reformers of the Punjab has formed different association to fight against social evils and for the spread of female education. And between 1900 and 1920s, "New Women", that is women who were the beneficiaries of the social reforms and educational efforts of the nineteenth century, stepped forward and formed their own organisations and associations.11

The male reformers of the Punjab and India formed many organisations like the Chief Khalsa Diwan, the Youngmen Sikh Association, The Khalsa Tract Society, Indian National Congress, The National Social conference and others. These associations mainly dealt with female education and always propagated against the social evil customs prevalent in the society. These organisations also organised various conferences relating to women issues.

The Bhujangan Council of Kairon in Amritsar, Bharat Stree Mahamandal with headquarters at Lahore, All India Women Conference, and others were some organisations which were formed due to the efforts of women. These organisations either formed by the males or females had one common goal – emancipation of women by eradicating social evil customs and propagating education among the girls.

The fifth chapter 'Women in Public Life (1901-47) deals with the discussion of the participation of women of Punjab in almost all the regional, national and international conferences during the colonial rule. The women used these conferences as an important platform to speak for themselves.

The Educational Committee of the Chief Khalsa Diwan of Amritsar started conducting The Sikh Educational Conference from 1908 in the Punjab. From 1908-47 there were thirty there sessions

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of the conference and in these sessions women started participating as mere visitors, then became fellows (that means they got registered) and presented papers and finally proposed various resolutions. Sikh Women Conferences were organised by the Bhujangan Ashram of Kairon from 1916\(^{13}\) onwards also witnessed the participation of large number of women of the province.

All India Women's Conference was established in 1927.\(^{14}\) Many women of Punjab like Begum Shah Nawaz (of Lahore), Lady Abdul Qadir (Lahore), Pritam Kaur (Ambala) Sushila Sethi, S.K. Dutta, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur (Kapurthala) and others actively participated in this national level organisation. The women in 1930s became so active that they even started to preside the all India level conferences. 'Like Shrimati Shano Devi of Jalandhar was the president of the All India Arya Women's Conference at Ajmer held on 19-20 October, 1933'.\(^{15}\)

Hence, this chapter elaborates the involvement of women in the public affairs of the province through the participation of women in all the regional and other conferences. This led them to communicate with the women of the other parts of India.

The sixth chapter is 'Women in the Nationalist Movement', it highlights the participation of women in the struggle for freedom in Punjab. The participation has been divided into five different phases – 1901-10, 1911-20, 1921-30, 1931-40 and 1941-47. In the first two

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13 Bhujangan Pattar, Kairon, 1 September, 1917, p. 17.
phases, the women were not much inclined to the politics but if there was any political event occurred in the other parts of India then the women of Punjab got affected. And sometimes they arranged meetings and published their articles in the vernacular press. Hence it was not a direct participation is the freedom struggle.

The active participation of women in the freedom struggle was mainly started after the passing of Rowlatt Act. The act included the emergency powers exercisable by the government for the purpose of dealing with anarchical and revolutionary movements. The government could arrest and detain suspected persons without showing any cause and warrant. To repeal the act various hartals and meeting were organized in Punjab in which women also participated. Such a meeting was held on 13 April, 1919 at Jallianwala Bagh at Amritsar. Here occurred the blood shed in which thousands of people died and after that martial law was implemented. During the martial law, ladies in almost all the districts of Punjab were humiliated by the British officials. They got infuriated and this led to the active participation of women in the struggle.

Thus, in the last three phases from 1920-47, there was a direct involvement of women in the Non Cooperation Movement (1920-22), Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-34) and Quit India Movement

17 Ibid, p. 35.
(1942-44) in the national struggle for freedom. They courted arrests; did picketing and hartalsil; led processions and even propagated about the constructive programme of Mahatma Gandhi.

The last chapter is 'Conclusion', it tries to give a clear picture about the women in colonial Punjab from 1901-47. Various conclusions are drawn in the chapter regarding 'How the women got affected due to the efforts of three main groups - the Britishers (that is the colonial rule), the male reformers of the society and the 'New Educated Women'?

The print media started by the Britishers then utilized by the male reformers in the form of vernacular press led the women to start their own journals and magazines in the second decade of the twentieth century. The women contributors regularly sent their articles stories, analysis, tales, experiences for publishing to the print media. This proves that the women who were earlier busy in their household activities and family got aware and they tried to share their life experiences with everyone in the society.

Education was one of the Central means by which the male reformers modified the prevailing understanding on women and also defined, constructed and then actively enshrined the new ideology into society. Education was simultaneously used for sculpting the "new women" and also for defining the limits of her modernity. The

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education initiatives taken by the colonial rulers and the male reformers led the women to get education and even helped them to choose new professions like medicine, law, teaching and others. As the awareness was coming in the society, so organisations and associations got emerged which made women to get involved in the public meeting of these organisations. And eventually, these active ladies during the years of nationalist struggle openly participated in the freedom movement.

Thus, it can be seen that women in colonial Punjab (1901-47) got affected by three main groups of the society – the Britishers, the male reformers and the educated women of the Punjab. These three groups tried to enlighten the women and wielded a tremendous influence on them to become a strong and powerful section of the society. They made them capable to fight for a more respectable status in the society. They developed the personality and rationality of the females which accorded them a high and equivalent status to the men in the social structure. They spearheaded the reform movement and urged to create a rational society based on equality and justice which are the hallmarks of any perspective and valve system coming under modernity. The male reformers visualized a partial modification in the ideas, valves and attitudes of the people which constitute modernity. Women's own initiatives and clamouring for public roles by the end of the nineteenth century also led changes in the status of women of
Punjab. This change is a never ending process which can also be seen in today's Punjab. Examples of many prominent women of Punjab can be seen which are enjoying a higher status in today's twenty first century. Like Maharani Praneet Kaur, Bibi Harsimrat Kaur Badal, Bibi Bhathal and others.

Hence, the dissertation includes the journey of women from journalism to education then to occupation. Occupation made them to form new organisations and led them to participate in the public affairs. These active ladies then jumped into the nationalist movement for the struggle and attained independence in 1947.

The following chart is drawn to summarize the dissertation.

Women in Colonial Punjab (1901-47)

3 main groups: The Britishers, the male reformers and the educated women.

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<th>Affected</th>
<th>Women and vernacular print media</th>
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<td>Women and Education, Occupation</td>
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<td>The Associations and Organisations for women</td>
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<td>Women participation in Public life</td>
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<td>Women participation in Nationalist Struggle</td>
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Thus, the chart depicts the three groups which were the main force behind the change in women's conditions, status and role in the society of Punjab.