
Efforts of Rajkumari Amrit Kaur for Women Concerns (1889-1964)

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This paper will throw light on the efforts made by Rajkumari Amrit Kaur for the cause of women concerns. She worked for the women of India before and after the partition of India. She belonged to the royal family but still she worked for her fellow sisters.

Rajkumari Amrit Kaur was a leading light of the Indian National Congress, a devoted disciple of Mahatma Gandhi, a dedicated social worker, a past President of Indian Women's Movement and a Minister in the Government of India for over a decade. She was also the secretary of Mahatma Gandhi over a number of years. Amrit Kaur was born in the royal Ahluwalia family of Kapurthala on 2nd Feb, 1889 in Lucknow. She was the only daughter of Raja Sir Harnam Singh who was entrusted with management of Kapurthala estates in the region of Oudh.

Rajkumari inherited Christianity as her religion as her father having embraced Christianity. Her mother was a Bengali Presbyterian Christian. She got her education in England. She was sent to Sherborne School for Girls, Dorsetshire and later joined a college in London. She devoted most of her time to sports along with her studies. She was very good player of tennis, and won many championships and in Lahore and Simla when returned to India after completing her education.¹ With her family and educational background, she could have led a life of affluence and luxury. However, when she returned to India, she got attracted towards the freedom movement and became a social worker.

She was initiated into national politics by the liberal congress leader, Gopal Krishna Gokhle, a good friend of her father. She once said, "The flames of my passionate desire to see India free from foreign domination were fanned by him". After sometime she came under the spell of Mahatma Gandhi and became one of his close followers. She served him as his secretary for 16 long years.²

After the death of her mother in 1924 and father in 1930, she settled all her family affairs and she left her home and came to live in Mahatma Gandhi's Sewagram ashram. The fine silks

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¹ Fauja Singh, *Eminent Freedom Fighters of Punjab*, New Delhi, Yugantar Press, 1972, p. 64.

² *The Tribune*, Chandigarh, 18 March, 2000.

and jewellery gave place to plain khadi and she became an active disciple of Mahatma Gandhi. She tried to organize the work of the spinners Association in Punjab and took up village industries work in five villages of Jalandhar districts and work for the Harijans in Simla. Sometimes visitors from Europe and the USA would be amazed to learn an Indian princess living in the ashram in an environment of austerities. She was his secretary of English language. She used to prepare more than 160 notes in own hand everyday along with other secretaries- Mahadev Desai and Pyrelal.³

She became Gandhian and followed the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi for her whole life. She first saw Mahatma Gandhi in 1915 in Bombay congress session when Lord Sinha was presiding. During the Rowlatt agitation, Mahatma Gandhi made special appeal to the women to join satyagraha movement in huge numbers and cooperate with men in their constitutional struggle. A large number of Indian women such as Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur, Sushila Nayar, Bibi Amtus Salaam, Mani Behn Patel, Sucheta Kriplani & Rehana Tayab ji acknowledged the powerful impact of Gandhi in moulding their lives, attitudes and aspiration.⁴

Gandhi began the Civil Disobedience Campaign in March 1930 with 240 mile march from Ahmedabad to Dandi to make salt in defiance of the British monopoly. The Women's India Association (hereafter WIA) specifically asked him to include women but he refused because he feared the British would call Indian men coward who hid behind. But later he allowed women to participate.⁵

She took active part in salt campaign or Dandi March of 1930 of Mahatma Gandhi and was arrested in Bombay. When the Communal Award was announced in 1932, she condemned it outright. As a representative of India National congress, she was sent on a mission of good will to Bannu in North West Frontier Province and for her seditious activities she was convicted on 16 July, 1937 and imprisoned.⁶

The khadi clad Amrit Kaur placed her services to Gandhiji's cause so that India could become an independent and self-respecting country. She worked unceasingly towards the

³ Verinder Grover and Ranjan Arora, *Rajkumari: Her Contribution to Political, Economic and Social Development*, New Delhi, Deep and Deep Publications, 1993, p. 356.

⁴ Kamlesh Mohan, "The Jallianwala Bagh Tragedy: Catalyst of Indian Consciousness" in V.N. Datta and S. Settar, Pragati Publication, ICHR, Delhi, 2000, p. 60.

⁵ Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, New Delhi, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 132.

⁶ Fauja Singh, *Eminent Freedom Fighters of Punjab*, New Delhi, Yugantar Press, 1972, p.57

objective of non-violent non-cooperation under Gandhiji's guidance. She spent her time in jails of India under very difficult conditions but she was able to adjust herself.⁷

In 1942, Quit India Movement was launched by Gandhi. During this movement she played a leading role in organizing processions and protest meetings. One procession subjected to ruthless lathi charge in Simla from August nine to sixteen the procession led by her were subjected to lathi charge fifteen times. Finally in one of such rallies in Kalka (Punjab) she suffered injuries when the troops charged the protestors. She was arrested and imprisoned again.⁸

As a trusted lieutenant of Mahatma Gandhi, Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur devoted herself specially to the constructive programme of Gandhi and spent much time for the upliftment of women and eradication of social evils such as early marriage, purdah system and illiteracy among womenfolk.⁹

In *Harijan* of 23 March 1940, she appealed to all branches, schools and colleges, and exhorted women to organize spinning classes and raise funds by sales and thus contribute to the wages of the spinners without simultaneously raising the price of khadi. She had the rare ability to motivate the women to educate the ignorant women electorate so that they would become intelligent and exercise with prudence their right to vote. The prospective women candidates who wished to stand for elections were asked to in close touch with the electorate, specially the women voters.

Being politician, she was a champion of women's rights and was a realist in attending to women's problems. She motivated women to come in large numbers and seek help for their problems from the committee members of AIWC. She wanted the All India Women's Conference's (AIWC) Shimla branch to meet once a month to enable women at large to come for counselling and health.¹⁰

Amrit Kaur not only worked and asked women to work for their emancipation but appealed to men in (1946) to help the cause of women in whatever way they can. They should refuse to early marriages, do away with purdah and polygamy and enroll themselves as voluntary workers and help women's cause "both practically and financially".

⁷ Verinder Grover and Ranjan Arora (eds), *Rajkumari Amrit Kaur: Her Contribution to Political, Economic and Social Development*, p. 357.

⁸ Manmohan Kaur, *Women in India's Freedom Struggle*, Sterling Publishers, New Delhi, p. 87.

⁹ S. R. Bakshi, *Indian National Movement and the Raj*, Criterion Publications, New Delhi, 1989, p.138-139.

¹⁰ Verinder Grover and Ranjan Arora (eds), *Rajkumari Amrit Kaur: Her Contribution to Political, Economic and Social Development*, p.364.

Through welfare organizations Amrit Kaur wanted the villages to be adopted for their betterment. She also worked for the upliftment of the downtrodden in villages by understanding their language. In one of her speeches in Jalandhar in 1932, she said “In the political life of country women have shown their capacity for suffering no less than men. The women from grassroot level should come forward and fight for their rights.....”¹¹

It was Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur who inspired thousands of women to work for the people by starting mobile clinics, opening libraries, nursery schools, crèches, hostels for working women, co-operatives in different parts of the country.

Raj kumari Amrit Kaur, in her letter dated 11 April, 1940, from Sewagram to Mrs. Rallia Ram, says “May I ask you to take up khadi work in earnest in Punjab-wearing it, using it, hawking it, and above all, spinning too? I wish we women would help Gandhi ji in this way”. She has rendered an invaluable service to women in placing khadi as central item in the programme of national reconstruction.¹²

She was instrumental in bringing about the birth of AIWC (The All India Women’s Conference) which first met in Poona in January 1927 under the distinguished leadership of Maharani Chinnabai Saheb Gaekwad of Baroda, following more than six months of serious work on the part of Margaret Cousins and other women belonging to the WIA.¹³ While the AIWC was planned solely as a one-time conference, its organization with local constituent conferences and annual sessions. It was founded as an educational conference but, from its first session it focused both social and educational questions.¹⁴ Beginning with education, then adding social customs which restricted female education, notably child marriage and Purdah, the AIWC continued to enlarge its preview. By the mid of 1930’s the list of subcommittees included labour, rural reconstruction, indigenous industries, textbooks, opium and the sarda Act. At the end of the 1930’s and in the early 1940’s the AIWC faced a series of challenges to its claim that it represented and could speak for all women. Amrit Kaur, one of the Gandhi’s devoted follower,

¹¹ *Ibid*, p.364.

¹² Usha Bala and Anshu Sharma, *Indian Women Freedom Fighters, 1857-1947*, New Delhi, Manohar Publishers, 1986, p.135.

¹³ Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, p.78.

¹⁴ Jana Matson Everette, *Women and Social Change in India*, New Delhi, M.A. Publishers, 1981, p.71.

wanted the organization to emerge as a political force for women. This proposal was voted down.¹⁵

The Motto of the AIWC '*Bhktya ma Abhiyani*' from the Bhagwat Gita was suggested by Amrit Kaur or through her efforts. Lakshmi N Menon was the editor of the 'Roshni'.¹⁶ In 1941, the AIWC established quarterly journal *Roshni*- meaning the light. And Menon said "I think the name was suggested by her if I remember right. She gave me unstinted support and was a regular contributor."¹⁷

From the very start in AIWC she gave her entire energies to building this national organization and helping it to wider its horizon as to reach throughout the country. She and Rani Rajwadi were the life and soul of the conference.¹⁸

In 1929, the British government announced its decision to hold first Round Table Conference. Various women organizations wanted to represent there but the government nominated Mrs. Radhabai Subbaroyan and Begum Shah Nawaz as representative of the Indian women as these both presented a memorandum in which they demanded an increase in the number of women voters and suggested the enfranchisement of the wives and widows of property holding male voters. The women organizations stood for adult suffrage. So, they were not allowed the represent.¹⁹

Early in 1931, a representative gathering of Indian women met in Bombay under the presidentship of Mrs. Sarojini Naidu and drafted a memorandum (known as Memorandum I) on the status of Indian women in the proposed new constitution of India, was adopted by the three main women's organizations of the country, viz, the AIWC, WIA and NCWI.²⁰ Indian national congress also adopted the policy of adult suffrage and the principal of equal rights for men and women in April 1931 in Karachi session.²¹

¹⁵Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, pp. 81-82.

¹⁶ Verinder Grover and Ranjan Arora (eds), *Rajkumari Amrit Kaur: Her Contribution to Political, Economic and Social Development*, p.353-354.

¹⁷ Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, p.82.

¹⁸Verinder Grover and Ranjan Arora (eds), *Rajkumari Amrit Kaur: Her Contribution to Political, Economic and Social Development*, p.357.

¹⁹ Radha Krishna Sharma, *Nationalism, Social Reform and Indian Women*, Patna, Janak Publishers, 1981, p.91.

²⁰ Verinder Grover and Ranjan Arora (eds), *Rajkumari Amrit Kaur: Her Contribution to Political, Economic and Social Development*, p.386.

²¹ Jana Matson Everette, *Women and Social Changes in India*, New Delhi, M.A. Publishers, 1981, p.71.

In May 1931, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur led the deputation of All India women's conference to the viceroy, Lord Irwin, to urge him to include a woman in the delegation that was going to the second round Table Conference in London in 1931. The proposal was agreed by the viceroy and Sarojini Naidu attended the conference as the representative of Indian women along with Smt. Subbaroyan and Begum Shah Nawaz.²²

The second Round Table was a failure as the questions of franchise and representation did not come up for discussion at that time. So, the Franchise committee appointed by the British government under the presidentship of Lord Lothian came out to India in the winter of 1931-32. And in the spring of 1932, Raj Kumari (Lahore), Mrs Lakshmi Menon (Allahabad) of AIWC, Mrs. Nallamuthu Ramamurthi (Madras) of WIA and Mrs. Maneklal Premchand (Bombay) of NCWI gave evidence before this committee.²³ Lothian committee agreed more women should be enfranchised, to facilitate social reforms and the recommended increasing the ratio of female to male voters from 1:20 to 1:5.²⁴ Amrit Kaur explained that, if franchise was to be restricted it should be so structured that women should count politically and be an effective force for reforms affecting women and children.²⁵

The Communal Award was announced in August 1932, the British government explicitly applied communal principles to women's franchise and representation. In the provincial legislatures, all seats, including those reserved for women, would be allocated to members of specific communities and the electorates for each seat would consist members of a single community.²⁶ AIWC and other women organizations expressed their disappointment and supported the Congress policy of joint electorates instead of separate electorates. Now a second memorandum (known as Memorandum II) was drawn up in June 1933 to be submitted to the Joint Select Committee of parliament on Indian constitutional reforms. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur along with Dr. S Muthulakshmi Reddi and Mrs. Sheefat Hamid Ali as the elected women representatives left for London to insist the committee on equality with men in matter of franchise, that is, *Adult suffrage*.²⁷

²² Verinder Grover and Ranjan Arora (eds), *Rajkumari Amrit Kaur: Her Contribution to Political, Economic and Social Development*, p.359.

²³ *Ibid*, p.386.

²⁴ Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, p.109.

²⁵ Jana Matson Everette, *Women and Social Changes in India*, p.127.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p.123

²⁷ Radha Krishna Sharma, *Nationalism, Social Reform and Indian Women*, p.93.

Not only equal right factions of women organizations of India worked for adult suffrage, even the various groups like the Indian National Trade Union Federation and the South Indian Liberal Federation supported them. The British committee for Indian women's franchise was formed having Lady Layton, Philip Hartog, and Mrs. O'strachey and Miss Eleanor Rathbone, MP as members. In 1934, AIWC, appointed Amrit Kaur as liason officer between foreign women's organization and the AIWC.²⁸

Thus, with the efforts of various women organization, the Indian women got political rights under the Act of 1935. In addition to these seats reserved for the women the women, they were not excluded from contesting other seats in any general election for any House.²⁹ The Government of India Act of 1935 extended the franchise to more than six million women, a great improvement on the figure of 3,15,000 under the Act of 1919. Thus, women voters increased by not less than twenty one times. Even then only two and half percent of adult women had received the right to vote.³⁰

Raj Kumari Amrit kaur presided the Nagpur session in December 1937 of AIWC. She worked hard in the women's campaign for the reform of Hindu Law, that is, the codification of Hindu Law (Hindu Code). She tried to convince the government to set up a commission to undertake this task. Amrit Kaur with Hansa Mehta and Lakshmi Menon formulated "Indian women's charter of Rights" in 1946. She demanded for equality of the sexes to be basis of citizenship in India and for improving the status of women in education, health, work, property rights and the family.

When freedom came and the constituent Assembly started work, Raj Kumari and Hansa Mehta were the prominent members of the Drafting committee of which Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar was the chairman along with prominent lawyers and experts. There were altogether fourteen women in the Constituent Assembly and they were all inspired to work together to bring equal rights for man and woman in the constitution.³¹

She had also served as the Chairperson of the All India Women's Education Fund Association and a member of the executive committee of Lady Irwin College, New Delhi. She

²⁸ Jana Matson Everette, *Women and Social Changes in India*, pp.131-132.

²⁹ Radha Krishna Sharma, *Nationalism, Social Reform and Indian Women*, p. 95.

³⁰ Aparna Basu, "The Role of Women in the Indian Struggle for Freedom" in B.R. Nanda, *Indian Women: From Purdah to Modernity*, New Delhi, Vikas Publishers, 1976, p.35.

³¹ Verinder Grover and Ranjan Arora (eds), *Rajkumari Amrit Kaur: Her Contribution to Political, Economic and Social Development*, p.357-358.

was appointed as a member (the 1st woman to be so appointed) by the British Raj to the Advisory Board of Education, a position which she resigned in the wake of Quit India Movement. She was sent as a member of the Indian delegation to participate in UNESCO's conference in London (1945) and in Paris (1946). She also served as a member of the Board of trustees of the All India Spinner's Association.³²

After India's independence, she became part of Jawahar Lal Nehru's first cabinet. She was the first woman to hold cabinet rank. She was assigned the Ministry of Health. As a health minister she did many things for the health of the nation and welfare of women and children. The introduction of the BCG vaccine programme to control Tuberculosis and many other innovative programme which with the laps of time became a part of national health policy such as family planning, eradication of small pox, malaria, training of nurses, health workers etc. She was also elected as the President of World Health Assembly in 1950, a position held by only 2 woman in the first 25 years of WHO's history.³³

She was also the moving force behind the conceptualization & building of the All India Institute of Medical Science in New Delhi & for establishing this institute she secured aid from New Zealand, funds from the West Germany for books and from Sweden to equip the laboratory and for establishing a rehabilitation centre aid from the Vocational Rehabilitation Centre of US with the cooperation of the Rockefeller Foundation and Punjab government to give medical relief and doing preventive and social work in a community block. She and her brother Col. Kanwar Shamsher Singh even donated their ancestral property and house named 'Manorville' (Simla, HP) to serve as a holiday for the staff and nurses of the institute. She functioned as the chairperson of the India Red Cross Society for fourteen years and during her leadership, Indian Red Cross did a number of pioneering works in the tribal belts and hinterland of India.³⁴

She remained member of Rajya Sabha from 1957 to 1964. However, until her death in 1964 she continued to hold charge of the Presidentship of the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) and the Tuberculosis Association and the chairman of Indian Red Cross and

³² Indira Gupta, *India's 50 Most Illustrious Women*, New Delhi, Icon Publications, 2003, p.75.

³³ Verinder Grover and Ranjan Arora (eds), *Rajkumari Amrit Kaur: Her Contribution to Political, Economic and Social Development*, p.357-358.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 359.

Saint John's Ambulance Corps. She even started the Raj Kumari sports coaching scheme in 1953 to encourage sports and many coaches were sent to different universities, school, colleges etc.³⁵

Thus, she was an eminent freedom fighter, active social reformer. She denounced evil practice of society like child marriage, system of purdah and both among the Muslims and Hindu women, illiteracy. She also actively espoused the cause of female education and believed in reforms in the education of Indian women, she was equally concerned about the lot of the Harijans. She was strong champion of widow remarriage and the laws relating to the inheritance of the property by women.

Raj Kumari Amri Kaur, who inherited the ablest traditions of royal house was not only a true patriot and a firm believer in non-violence, but had also been instrumental in the eradication of many of our social evils.

³⁵*Ibid*, p.400.